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A Nine-Days' Wonder.

A Novelette.

BY

HAMILTON AIDÉ,

AUTHOR OF "RITA," "THE MARSTONS," "PENRUDDOCKE," ETC.

BY WHOM THE TALE HAS BEEN DRAMATIZED AS PLAYED
AT THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE.



BOSTON :

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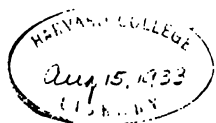


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Walter B. Gregory

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A NINE DAYS' WONDER.

CHAPTER I.

THE scene of the following story is sufficiently far from the beaten track to have retained some of the characteristics of a village, as villages were forty years ago. It is true that a branch line of railroad, connecting two unimportant towns, has a station within a mile of Millwood; but two down-trains only, stop here in the course of the twenty-four hours, — one at mid-day, the other at midnight; and its immunity from a second post sufficiently indicates Millwood's being stranded, while the rapids of business shoot past it. People get their "Times" here the second day, at breakfast: they never talk lightly of "running up to town," but proclaim their approaching "journey to London" with befitting gravity, some days in advance. There is one general

shop, where a flavor of snuff, peppermint, and tallow candles, pervades every thing impartially; and where woollen goods and catskin tippets in the window make way for straw hats and cotton prints as soon as the lanes become yellow with primroses. Not that the gentry patronize "The Emporium," as it is styled, for their habiliments. No, the town of Barfield is within a pony-chaise drive, where fish and fashions can be procured tolerably fresh, — at least, so it is believed; and, if a sacrifice must be made to the general principle that Mrs. Jennings's shop ought to be upheld, let it be the inner, not the outward, man or woman that suffers. Though the tea never saw China, and the sugar be half sand, they will mortify their stomachs, but their vanities — no. As to those new-fangled "co-operative associations," they are held to be eminently ungentleel; and

no one in Millwood society, however limited his means, would be found bold enough to give in his adherence to a system so radical, so subversive, "so unjust, you know."

It will at once be understood that the society of Millwood is an oligarchy, into which no wealthy autocrat has forced his way. The fortunes of the upper ten or twelve range from moderate to poor, with one exception; and, even in this case, no great extent of demesne overshadows his neighbors. Mr. Vavasour, the hospitable, warm-hearted owner of Laurel Bank, returned from India six years before the beginning of my story, with a considerable fortune in the funds. He bought the pretty Gothic house standing just outside the village, with its forty acres, and spared no expense in making it a thoroughly comfortable home.

This man, though quick-tempered, was kindly to a fault. His generosity knew no distinction of persons; and he was, of course, often imposed upon. But his cordial and unostentatious sociability infused a new element into Millwood society from the first six months after he and his little girl came to reside here. They rarely sat down to dinner alone; but the prim "resident gentry," used to formal written invitations of a week's notice, couched in the third

person, were at first a good deal startled by the new-comer's unceremonious requests, when he met a neighbor on the road, to "drop in at seven o'clock to our leg of mutton, and we'll have a rubber afterwards." It is surprising how quickly the plate armor of conventionality will melt before good cheer and geniality. Vavasour had an excellent cook; but there was no attempt at grandeur, no assumption of any kind in his manner, or mode of living. Indeed, there was far more of both among some of his poorer friends. To them he accorded the freedom of walking about his extensive gardens and shrubberies, and of using a little postern-door in the wall, which was a short cut to the house, instead of going round by the carriage-drive. These privileges his intimate friends profited unsparingly by; and the result was a closer and more constant intercourse than is often found among village neighbors.

Vavasour was a widower of fifty-three; but, in spite of nearly twenty years passed in India, he was still a young man in his eye, in his voice, and in his figure,—short, slight, erect, a fast walker, and a fast, energetic speaker, handsome features, hair that was only beginning now to turn from black to gray, and dark, intelligent eyes, that kindled or melted

with the speaker's mood ; for he could be quick to anger at times, as he was quick to tenderness ; in short, an impulsive nature, retaining too much of its youthful elasticity to be always reasonable, far-sighted, or self-contained, but possessing a capital head for work, and abilities which he had turned to the best account during his career,—a man universally respected by his equals, and loved by the poor, but accounted too much of an optimist by his rector and by his fellow-magistrates, to be altogether safe upon the bench.

He had gone to India when he was six and twenty ; had married there soon after he was thirty, and had been left a widower eight years later, with a little girl not three years old. He had sent the child soon afterwards to England, to the care of his sister, Lady Clive, but had remained out himself, with great self-sacrifice, until he had realized enough to secure a handsome fortune for his daughter. And he was now reaping his reward ; for in spite of past trials, to which it will be needful to refer by and by, a happier man than William Vavasour could hardly be found. That this was the result of temperament even more than of outward circumstances, is true ; for though he adored his daughter (who was all that the best of fathers could desire),

neither this nor his worldly prosperity would have satisfied a man of anxious, morbid disposition. We all of us know men whose capacity for unalloyed contentment is so meagre, that they cannot enjoy their food for wondering whether it will disagree with them. But Vavasour was otherwise constituted. It is doubtful whether, even during the nine years he was separated from his child, his hopeful, buoyant spirit, forever looking at the bright side of things, did not render him a more enviable man than many who had no such cruel trial to undergo ; and certain it is that neither early sorrow, nor eight years of misery with an uncongenial wife, had checked that healthy aptitude for enjoyment, which rendered him, at fifty-three, so delightful a companion to his child.

Kate Vavasour, who was nearly nineteen at the time I begin this story, resembled her father in her fine organization, her vivacity, and her reluctance to harbor an evil thought of any human being. But that which was often counted as weakness in the man, and brought a smile to the lips of the cynical, when some instance of his credulity having been imposed on came to light, was pardoned in the girl. No one had ever called Kate weak. She was high-spirited, joyous, full of fun ; indomitable,

whether in argument or on horse-back, at croquet, or cottage-visiting in sickness; a bright, fearless creature, who tossed away the mud of village gossip that could not but bespatter her at times, as you have seen a bird shake off the raindrops from its glossy wings. Every one loved Kate. Old Admiral Howland's lamentation over the depravity of Millwood, upon which the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah was about to descend; his denunciations of the government, which was "allowing the service to go to the devil, sir;" his vehemence, pious and profane, by turns,—were softened at Kate's approach. The three or four old men who led the male force of Millwood were, indeed, all her slaves,—the parson, the doctor, and the ubiquitous, cheery-faced Capt. Boycott, of whom more anon. The women loved her too, "but with a difference." They were all more than thrice her age; so that rivalry was out of the question. They advised, they admonished, they held up the light of their own experiences to guide her in her difficult path as a young housekeeper. Miss Tarragon, who "knew what servants were;" Mrs. Loveden, whose retrospect of days when she kept a page and a one-horse carriage was tinged with sentiment,—manifested an active interest in the young girl's conduct of her father's house,—

an interest which took at times so pronounced and accentuated a form, that nothing but a perfect temper, and a keen sense of humor, prevented Kate's resenting it. She never did so, however; nor Mrs. Crowe's little sarcastic fling, about girls who *rode* at men now, as they did at a fence, and who, whatever else they lacked, could not be said to be wanting in stable attractions. These ladies were, all of them, fond of Kate, in their way; though that way was one that often worried her. She possessed some secret charm for young and old, which her beauty did not warrant in the eyes of the critical. She was graceful, radiant, variable, a creature redolent of health and light, tall, with a well-poised head, and abundant light hair. As to details, I never knew any one who could tell the shape of her nose, or remember whether her eyes were blue or gray.

Laurel Bank was a house such as only exists in England, and is characteristic of the opulent middle-class of this country. You may find in the great French *château* or Austrian *Schloss* some sort of resemblance to our own ancestral dwellings; but the unostentatious comfort of the modern home, where cosiness nestles under Gothic gables, and luxuriant evergreens wall in the well-swept gravel paths; where

the oriel windows and big fire-places of the past are married to cretonne curtains and steel grates; where the flowers on the lawn are astapestry woven on green velvet, and cleanliness and consistency reign everywhere hand in hand, — such a house is eminently English. The same sort of villa in France would be stuck in a prominent position; would court attention with bright paint and plaster statues, gaudy summer-houses, and gilt *grille*. The clustered red-brick chimneys of Laurel Bank were all that could be seen from the road; the house, which was but a few yards distant, being cunningly masked by the shrubbery. The carriage entrance — the only legitimate entrance, indeed, for strangers — was through a gate, by a winding gravel road, between evergreens to the porch. But, nearer to the village, there was, as I have said, a small door in the wall, by using which those who came from the village cut off a large angle, and were enabled to peep in at the large circular window of the drawing-room, directly under which the pathway led; thus rendering it impossible for any occupant of that apartment to plead “not at home.” As far as regarded the near neighbors indeed, the hall-door and its bell need never have existed: they walked about the garden, they poked in their faces at the window;

and, if they saw Kate or her father, they said, “May we come in?” There was a door through the conservatory into the drawing-room; and this was in truth the entrance every one used. No crowned head ever enjoyed less privacy than this simple gentleman; for the community of Millwood was well fitted to represent “the fierce light that beats upon a throne.” To most men this would have been an intolerable bore; but Vavasour never seemed to mind it, and had brought up his daughter to consider it as belonging to the natural order of things that she should never be safe from intrusion, except when she was in her own boudoir up stairs.

Of the interior of Laurel Bank, it is only needful that I should describe the drawing-room, as its shape and position influenced certain events in the following story. It formed the south-western angle of the house; and its peculiarity consisted in this corner being cut off by a wide circular window, divided by five mullions, not open to the ground, but within three feet of it. The high oak mantle-piece faced this window on one side: on the other was a door into the conservatory, which was on the south side of the house. Beneath it, and stretching away to the east, were the gardens; while of the village which was due south of Laurel Bank,

but lay considerably lower, nothing but the church-spire could be seen from the ground-floor. Thus those who did not toil up the hill to the lodge-gate, but (turning in at the postern-door on the right, immediately after leaving the village) followed the narrow gravel path that cut diagonally through the shrubbery, and across the lawn, found themselves at the south-western angle of the house, and, consequently, had to pass under the window I have described, before reaching the conservatory, or the gardens which lay beyond.

This drawing-room was the most charming, to my mind, that I have ever seen for "human nature's daily food;" full of sunshine, of color, and of picturesque contrast; sinning against many canons of critical taste, no doubt, in the juxtaposition of old things with new, of the precious and the worthless, — Indian cabinets, cloisonné enamel, Japanese bronzes, Satsuma vases, with chintz, cheap china, photographs, and flower-stands. There was harmony in the colors; but they were bright, none of the chastened unity now enjoined on those who furnish. But, for the living-rooms in which we are to play our daily parts, — support the hourly burdens of perplexity and disappointment, and not only love and laugh, but suffer and grow old, — commend me

to the general effect which gladdens my spirit, no matter though the combinations be too robust to satisfy a rigid eclecticism. 'Tis as though we spoke immaculate grammar in a whisper for our common parlance. I love the cheery speech that is careless of its subjunctives, so that the tone be melodious. And in the drawing-room at Laurel Bank all was in the major-key; though Heaven knows there was enough of minor pathos and misery in passages of which it was to be the witness.

CHAPTER II.

MILLWOOD was not a picturesque village; but it was surrounded by pretty country, undulating with woods and streams, as its name indicated, and happily, as yet, untainted by factory chimneys. The long steep street which formed the lower part of the hill of which I have spoken terminated in a square, or "Green," as it was called; and here dwelt all the important members of Millwood society, not to speak of "The Bell," of Mrs. Jennings's Emporium, and of the village surgery. The squat little church and humble parsonage stood apart: they were, as befitted them, "in the world, and not of it," so to speak; at hand for those who sought them, but not necessarily witness to the dissipation of the Green. Four sub-

stantial old-fashioned red-brick houses were the most notable features of the square, of which the largest was "The Bell," and the smallest Capt. Boycott's; the second in importance being the joint residence of Mrs. Crowe and Miss Tarragon; while the third was inhabited by Admiral Howland. Then there were, in addition to these, the surgeon's cemented dwelling, which looked as if it were covered with old adhesive plasters, which were gradually peeling off; and Mrs. Loveden's "Woodbine Cottage," an insecty abode of one story, smothered in creepers, with a tiny strip of garden in front.

"The Bell" was above the average of village inns; for it often enjoyed the patronage of hunting-men from a distance, when the meets were near Millwood; and in the summer the neighboring scenery occasionally attracted artists and chance travelers. Situated as it was, no one could go in or out of "The Bell," without being seen by the whole Green. Woe to the runaway youth who entered the bar twice on a hot summer's afternoon! Admiral Howland would denounce him to the rector. Woe to the extravagant hussey for whom that pink ribbon was taken out of Mrs. Jennings's window — "The Emporium" is next "The Bell" — Miss Tarragon would

rate her mother soundly on the very first opportunity. Or, if these dragons of the public virtue were absent from their post, were there not twenty or thirty other pairs of eyes on the alert, twenty or thirty tongues with no other occupations than to fetch and carry tittle-tattle? It was a moral impossibility that a dog should cross the Green, and that fact not be vouched to by a dozen witnesses.

Admiral Howland was the foremost man in Millwood, both by reason of his rank, and of his vigorous self-assertion. A wound received in some unimportant action, which had shortened the sinews of his left leg, caused him to be generally accepted as a hero and an authority upon public affairs; for, if a man who had bled for his country condemned its polity, what was then to be said? He was now in the vale of years; but age had not dimmed his eye, nor softened his strident utterances, which, broadly stated, might be said to be a sort of secular commination-service over the present generation and all existing institutions. In *his* day, things were different: "but now, sir, damn'ee, the world's grown so irreligious, disbelieves Genesis, wants 'relaxation' on Sunday. Relaxation, indeed! I'd relax some of these atheistical writers, if I had them on the quarter-deck;"

and he would flog the leading column of "The Times" with his forefinger, as he spoke. He might be seen daily, from ten till one, in his parlor-window, "The Times," or "Naval and Military Gazette," in his hand, his white hair in a chronic state of bristle, his spectacles half-way down his long nose, so that, at the least stir in the outer world, he had but to raise his eyes in order to rake the Green; or be met in the afternoon, on his way to one of his neighbors, limping sturdily along the road with the aid of a strong stick. Every one was more or less afraid of the admiral. Even the vicar stood a little in awe of him: he fought the battles of the Church; but he fought them so ferociously as to disincline men to the stern Calvinism he would have forced upon them; and, though the vicar treated the fiery old advocate with great consideration, he was as a thorn in his pastor's flesh.

I have observed that the admiral was there to mark what was amiss in his neighbors. He was a gossip, but one who took small interest in any tidings that were not of an afflicting nature. Births and marriages he made small account of: there was nothing to make of them, unless, indeed, it was gloomy prognostications; whereas ill conduct, losses, disaster, not to speak of death, gave a

free scope for texts, and references to "another place," as they say in the House. For all this, he was not an unkind man, liberal to the poor, and wishing no one evil at heart, I believe; but he was a terrible scourge in a small village, for all that.

Next to the admiral's, in the corner of the Green, over against "The Bell," was Mrs. Loveden's cottage, — Mrs. Loveden, who, purling as a brook, and vigilant as a hen, sat in her bay-windowed drawing-room, with one eye on the French verb she was teaching her son, the other furtively wandering to Capt. Boycott's front-door opposite. This amiable lady, a juvenile widow of fifty, had once fed on the wild hope of making the captain hers. She was gushing and sentimental in the extreme; she still spoke of his "manly form" with effusion, and worked him muffetees every winter. But the good-humored, burly captain was obdurate; and Mrs. Loveden had lately turned to her son as a vicarious sacrifice to her love of romance. Alcibiades was the same age as Kate Vavasour: they were made for each other, said Mrs. Loveden. Kate's fortune, in addition to her other charms, rendered her a prize which any man in the county might be proud to win; but, with the happy blindness of a mother, Mrs. Loveden did not see why her son, with his

mouth ajar, his purposeless hands, and weak wispy hair, should not succeed, where Lord Henry and Sir George, both accomplished men of the world, had failed. *They* had had only occasional opportunities of prosecuting their suits, — in the hunting-field, and at croquet-parties, or balls; whereas Alcibiades had been enjoying daily intercourse with Kate for the last eight years. She could not be insensible to his fidelity. And who knew his amiability, his assiduity at his studies, his virtuous conduct, unspecked by any of the follies incident to youth, so well as the girl who had grown up beside him?

Alcibiades had just received his commission; and the fond mother firmly believed her son to be an embryo Wellington. The choice of a profession had not, indeed, been directed by any warlike proclivities on the part of the young man, but in accordance with the will of a strange uncle, happily deceased, who had insisted on the boy's being named after his favorite hero of antiquity, and had made the settlement of three hundred a year upon him contingent on his entering the army. As Mrs. Loveden's means were very straitened, it was of the last importance that her son should not forfeit the inheritance left to him under such arbitrary conditions; and from his earliest years

he was told that he was to be a soldier. A lad less fitted by nature to adorn Her Majesty's service, it would have been hard to find. As soon might one expect a willow to bear thorns, as the sloping-shouldered youth, whose mental and physical fibre were equally flabby, to develop any sprouts of a bellicose nature. He had never crossed a horse, nor shot a rabbit, nor licked a boy in his life. A mild cricket was the extent of his athletic exercise; a dogged silence, the limit of his resistance under pressure. But the poor lady firmly believed that her son united every quality requisite to become a distinguished commander, and never wearied of recounting, how, when he had a double-tooth extracted, "He did not flinch, my dear! He uttered not a groan! As the dentist said himself to me, 'It is such stuff as *this*, ma'am, that made us win Inkerman.'" However that might be, he was plodding; and with the aid of a tutor from Barfield three times a week, and six months with "a crammer," before going up for his examination, he had passed it respectably; while many a stalwart youth, cut out to be a soldier, had been sent home disconsolate.

This had been in the previous spring; and orders had now come for him to join the depot of the regiment to which he was appointed, at Chatham, on Sept. 1.

Kate was from home, and would be absent some weeks: Mrs. Loveden counted each day till her return. She was resolved that Alcibiades should propose before leaving home; for though, according to her, "*both* the young people were too young to marry yet," it was safer, with a view to accidents, that they should be engaged. Unless Alcibiades spoke now, the golden moment might be lost forever, and sweet Kate be swept away by some horrid fortune-hunter, before her bright, her gallant boy returned, crowned with laurels. Dear Kate! could she remain proof against the moral worth of Alcibiades? Impossible! And, if she did, could she resist the sight of him in undress uniform, with forage-cap and sword?—a vision projected upon Mrs. Loveden's imagination as soon as the military tailors' circulars poured in. No! Let Alcibiades make the most of his advantages, and the day was his.

Mrs. Loveden was in appearance like a dissolving-view, there being a general vapory look about her, and a tendency in every thing she wore to slip off; so that one was always in a pleasing state of expectancy as to what might be disclosed. She wore a shawl, or scarf, in all weathers, which constantly drooped, and was as constantly hitched up. Her cap was forever falling off; and as to her

veil, her handkerchief, and her gloves, they were scattered, as she poetically expressed it, "like the petals of a flower," wherever she moved. She clung to the ringlets of her youth, drank basinfuls of weak tea, and melted at her own narratives of past opulence. This tendency, coupled with the fact that the pores of the good lady's skin seemed to be perpetually open, incited Mrs. Crowe to observe, "Mrs. Loveden is *made* of tears. Why, her hand always weeps when I wring it." But, if Mrs. Crowe laughed at her, Miss Tarragon's stronger sense of duty made her unsparing in the application of the nettle to the shoulders of her sentimental and garrulous neighbor. The men were kinder. The admiral, it is true, told her that she was making a milksop of her boy, and "pooh-poohed" her accounts of the talents and prowess of Alcibiades; but then every one was used to the admiral's gruffness; and the conduct of mother and son was too blameless to justify the outpouring of ferocious texts upon them. As to Capt. Boycott, he was not averse to paying her long visits, and discharging himself of all the news he had succeeded in picking up, while he allowed, in return, the tap of her fluent vacuity to be turned on him.

He was a bachelor, living alone, and the possessor of a huge and

hideous horse, upon the top of which he mounted every afternoon. Was there an errand wanted at Barfield, Capt. Boycott was called upon to execute it. He has been seen returning home, laden with a basket of fish, a parcel of books, and a consignment of rout-cakes for Mrs. Crowe and Miss Tarragon (in view of an impending tea-party). But these friendly offices were as nought when compared with his labors for the diffusion of knowledge among his friends. He would not have harmed a fly, (kind, empty-headed man!) and was as innocent of evil intention in carrying to and fro the fuel for village gossip, as the retriever who fetches a box of lucifers is ignorant of their explosive nature. He was essentially a "loafer," outside his hall door, with a clay pipe; wandering into "The Bell" coffee-room, should any chance stranger enter; walking to the station every morning to meet the sole day-train; and, in the High Street of Barfield, every afternoon, gleaning news from the saddler and stationer, and accosting every one he met. The captain's shaggy good-humor rendered him a general favorite with women and children; and there was an arm-chair for him by every fireside, where, in the twilights, he disgorged himself of the day's accumulated gossip.

Some of us may remember Miss

Tarragon years ago, when she was living in Ashford. Time had not changed her needle-pointed eyes and steel-ribbed tongue. She had been for the last seven years a resident in Millwood, where an aunt had left her a house, and had divided a small estate between her and a widowed niece of her husband's, Mrs. Crowe. The two ladies elected to live together, and, by uniting their slender incomes, enjoyed many comforts which neither could have afforded singly; and, as each was well able to take care of herself, the commonwealth answered perfectly. Those who did not know Miss Tarragon in past years should be informed that she was a tall, imperative, inquisitorial lady, of what is termed strong good sense. Her tongue spared no one. She marched into every cottage, railed at the good-wife's neglect of her kitchen, scolded the children, threatened the pater-familias, and made her bounties—for she *was* bountiful—to be felt as coals of fire on the heads of the recipients. No wonder that she was far less popular than her fat, chuckling companion, who laughed at every thing, was surprised at nothing, and never willingly gave a farthing to any one. Mrs. Crowe was, indeed, very good company, when her barbs of satire were not pointed with too apparent an effort. The sparring between her

and Miss Tarragon was felt to be a sort of summer lightning, which could hurt neither party. Mrs. Crowe had a keen relish for gossip; and, if it assumed the dimensions of scandal, she was the more amused: but she was of that philosophic turn of mind which is so fully prepared for all the frailties of human nature, that they only raise a laugh, and are regarded as new specimens to be submitted to the microscope of cynical analysis.

I have now introduced those members of Millwood society with whom we shall be thrown more or less in the following pages. The rector, the surgeon, and one or two others of little weight, I need not describe; for they do not cross the thread of my story. They stand in the background, like the chorus in an opera, and reflect the emotions of the chief actors, in words which they bandy with each other when they meet upon the Green; such as, "Good gracious! *Have* you heard what has happened?" &c.

But we need not stay to listen.

CHAPTER III.

It was a hot morning, two Augusts since, when Capt. Boycott stood on the platform of the small Millwood station, awaiting the arrival of the train, with the same eager interest he had evinced

in the event pretty nearly every day for the last ten years. Grouse might reasonably be expected from the north to-day, for the 12th was past; and an examination of the addresses on the baskets would lead to speculation as to the dinner-parties which would be their natural sequence. Should this source of innocent recreation fail, Mudie's box for the book-club was almost sure to come to-day; and Mrs. Loveden was anxiously expecting Alcibiades' uniforms. Altogether, this morning promised an unusual crop of interest. But when the meagre little train, scarcely twenty yards long, puffed up, a prize exceeding his wildest hopes was captured by the eager gossip-monger.

Capt. Boycott never failed to peer into the solitary first-class carriage, in the hope of finding an acquaintance journeying to Barfield, from whom shreds of county news might be torn, and carried back in triumph to the Green. But now, as he hurried up to the window, he found it blocked by the handsome person of a lady, who extended a hand, and said, "Porter, open the door, if you please." The porter was not at hand: the gallant captain was. He handed out the fair traveller, and her foreign-looking maid after her, her Russian-leather bag, her shawls and umbrellas. Could he be of any use in sending her a fly

from the village? She thanked him: she meant to walk to the inn. What was the name of it? He told her, took off his hat with a flourish such as he seldom indulged in now, and retired, like a gentleman as he was, the lady giving him no encouragement to pursue the conversation. He could not forbear from walking leisurely round the two huge trunks which were being lifted on a hand-truck; but the information he gathered was slender. "A. F., Station Millwood," was the present address: the word "Durham" on the label had been scratched out. Who could she be? What on earth could such a gorgeous-looking lady, with her delicate kid boots, the like of which had probably never been seen in Millwood, want at "The Bell" inn? He walked rapidly home to communicate the amazing intelligence to his neighbors; and the fever of his curiosity, in combination with the burning sun, nearly caused him a fit of apoplexy by the time he reached the Green. In the mean time we will describe the lady, as we follow her more leisurely steps to "The Bell."

A casual observer might have taken her to be a little past thirty: an acute woman would detect that she was some years older: no one could have guessed her to be four and forty. She was tall, rather large, but beautifully made; and,

as she held her white dress well up out of the dust, one saw not only the well-shaped feet and ankles, but how admirably she was poised upon them. She needed no heels, and had none: the foot came firmly and evenly to the ground, and bore up a noble and elastic frame, that neither rolled nor tottered. Her handsome face was lit by expressive eyes and faultless teeth; and never was there a better illustration of the "*lampeggiar dell' angelico riso*" than when she broke into a smile. There was an enchantment in it that few could resist, coupled with a voice like that which the old poet said was "far above singing." She loved to exercise this fascination on whomsoever she met, — the chance companion on her journey, the railway porter at the end of it: she was a woman all over. Her face was thoughtful now, thoughtful and anxious; and physiognomy can be better studied at such moments than when the visor is dressed for society. In spite of her elaborate elegance, it was easy to read now, with the visor raised, that she had known suffering, and that her mind, even at this moment, was ill at ease. That she was clever, it was impossible to doubt; that she was in some sense artificial, might be assumed. Whatever else she might be, for good or bad, I defy any one to tell; inasmuch as her face indi-

cated so many qualities apparently incompatible, that it was impossible to decide how they might counteract upon each other in the conduct of life.

The arrival of such a traveller at "The Bell" naturally created great commotion, not only at the inn, but in all the houses on the Green, where every neck was craned from the windows at the unwonted spectacle. The first-floor parlor, adorned with old racing prints, and where the flies swarmed, in the absence of other occupants and of fresh air, was opened for the new-comer, together with the adjoining bedroom.

"You need not send up my boxes," said the lady, turning with her sweet smile to the landlady, Mrs. Garfitt, who stood courtesying at the door. "My stay here is uncertain; and my maid can take out all I want below. Let me have some luncheon, will you, please, and give my maid some dinner. She does not speak English. Have you any soup? — foreigners like it. No? Well, let her have plenty of vegetables, and a chicken perhaps? Thank you — stay — can you tell me how far Laurel Bank is from Millwood?"

"Quite close, ma'am. It's *in* Millwood, as one may say: the grounds run right down 'ere at the back."

"Oh! — Is Mr. Vavasour at home now? I heard he was" —

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Vavasour's at 'ome, and Miss Kate's expected 'ome o' Monday."

"Oh, indeed!" said the lady; and then, after a pause, "I shall want a note taken up to Laurel Bank presently. You can send some one for me?"

"Certainly, ma'am," said Mrs. Garfitt, as she dropped another courtesy, and left the room to give her necessary orders, and to retail, with sundry amplifications, what had passed, to the captain, who just chanced to stroll in at that moment.

The lady, meanwhile, unlocked her Russian-leather bag, and took out her writing-materials: then she leaned her head upon her hand, and meditated for some minutes. The note she wrote at last was a short one, covering only two sides of a small sheet; but she laid her pen down twice in the course of its composition, and hesitated when she had re-read it, before committing it to an envelope. The note ran as follows: —

"DEAR MR. VAVASOUR, — It is so long since we met, that I hesitate to recall myself to your recollection. Not that I think you will have forgotten the Amabel Taylor of six and twenty years ago, but that there is little or nothing that can recall the young girl in the middle-aged woman who writes this. She has followed *your* career with interest: do you

know any thing of hers? . . . I am here for a few hours; come and see me, if you can, and shake hands with an old friend under her present name of

"AMABEL FITZROY."

The note was sent. The luncheon was left untouched for more than half an hour, while Mrs. Fitzroy sat gazing abstractedly out on the village green, with a vague sense of buzzing flies, and of boys shouting over their marbles; but her thoughts were far away.

"Bless my soul! when did this come?" cried Mr. Vavasour, when he entered the dining-room an hour later, and found the note upon his plate. "I must write an answer immediately. Stay! No. Is Garfitt's boy there still? Tell him to say I will call upon the lady in ten minutes' time." And he plunged his knife into a round of beef as the door closed behind the butler.

"How strange, after all these years!" he said to himself, — "after my having so completely lost sight of her, for us to meet now! What a lovely creature! what a smile! what a voice! And how madly in love I was for the first, ay, for the *only*, time in my life! If she had cared for me as much as I did for her, — h'm! why, things might have been different — that's all. Perhaps I shouldn't have my Kate. It was all for the best. Know any thing of Amabel's career? No. How should

I, out in India? She married very soon: that was all I knew — all I cared for. I dare say she had heaps of children, and is a grandmother now. Ah, if I wanted to preserve my old romance, I ought not to see her. But we can meet without any bitterness of feeling now; and I shall like to shake hands with her once more. How strange!"

And, seizing his hat, he hurried out. The village green was greatly exercised, when it beheld Mr. Vavasour enter "The Bell." The fact of the note was, of course, public property by this time; and it was felt to be but due to society that every one should remain at his post of observation as long as the master of Laurel Bank remained closeted with the fair stranger.

She had finished her luncheon when he was announced; and he almost visibly started back as he entered the room, and saw the splendid woman before him. Was there not some mistake? Could this be the slight, pale girl with dark hair, whom he remembered as if he had seen her but yesterday? This golden-locked, Titianesque beauty, with her superb bust and brilliant coloring, had absolutely nothing in common, at first sight, with the Amabel of his youth. He held out his hand, indeed; but the words died on his lips.

Mrs. Fitzroy was the more composed of the two; but then she stood with her back to the light.

"I told you you would not recognize me," she said in a low voice. And then the magic smile, which Vavasour had never forgotten, lit up the woman's face before him, and the thrill of her voice brought back a rush of memories. He could not let go her hand now; but he still remained silent. Perhaps this unspoken greeting pleased Mrs. Fitzroy better than an effusive cordiality.

"Time has altered *you* very little," she continued. "I should have known you anywhere."

"I? Why, I'm a yellow old Indian," he replied with a deprecatory movement of the head; "while you — you are only changed for the better. You're positively handsomer, much handsomer, than you were as a girl."

The springs of Vavasour's speech were in too warm a soil to be long frozen: they now flowed freely.

"Only think of our meeting again, after all these years! — after my trying so often to find out what had become of you, and never being able to learn any thing after your marriage! In India I lost sight of every one, and came home to find a new generation sprung up, and nearly every one dead I had ever known. I had lost all clew to you, and —

and — do you know, I did not even know your name was Fitzroy."

They were sitting on the black horse-hair sofa, opposite the window. There was an expression of pain on Mrs. Fitzroy's face, which was natural under the circumstances; but she watched her visitor's countenance narrowly as she said, —

"You only heard of my first marriage, then?"

"What! have you been married twice?"

"I have."

"Really! Only think of that! And is Mr. Fitzroy alive?"

"No: he died two years ago."

"Indeed! Have you any children?" He asked this with his usual abruptness, and felt sorry he had done so the moment after, when he saw the look of sharp anguish that shot across her face.

"I had once," she replied. "I have none now."

"Forgive me, my dear Amabel, — Mrs. Fitzroy, I mean, — forgive my stupid question. But remember, I know nothing of your life; and when such old friends as we meet, after so many years, one wants to pick up all the loose threads."

"There are threads it is better to let drop," she said with a sigh. "My past has not been a happy one. I have had two miserable experiences of marriage; and I am

now utterly alone in the world, without a relation, I might say without a friend, to care what becomes of me."

"Come, come, don't say that. Depend on it, you shall not want for friends as long as I and my girl are alive. Wait till you see Kate. If you don't fall in love with my treasure, I shall be disappointed. She is wife and friend and child,—every thing to me. Without her, I should be a miserable old fogey : as it is, there's not a happier man in the county."

Had Vavasour not been true to the core, and as incapable of insincere gallantry as he was of that self-watchfulness which the world calls discretion, he would not have vaunted his present happiness to his old love : a tinge of sentimental regret would have lent to his countenance something of the hue of resignation. As it was, he spoke out of the fulness of his heart, without a thought as to what effect his words would produce. Mrs. Fitzroy laid her hand gently on his arm ; and tears stood in her eyes as she said, —

"I am glad of it, my old friend. . . . I am glad to think it was only I who was punished for my folly in past years. You deserve to be happy ; for you are the best man I ever knew. Had others been like you, I should — I should, perhaps, be better and happier than I am."

Don't fancy mine has *always* been a bed of roses," said Vavasour quickly ; and a shadow crossed his brow. "I have had *my* trials too. However, they are past and gone now ; and I dare say all was for the best," which was his mode of settling most points with reference to the past, present, or future.

"Where are you living?" he asked once more abruptly.

"Nowhere. I have been a waif and stray for years. Mr. Fitzroy's health obliged us to live abroad, trying various climates and various baths. He died in Florence, leaving me very poor ; and I came to England a few months ago. I want a home ; for I am sick of wandering about the world, and all I ask for is peace. A sister of Mr. Fitzroy invited me to go and stay with her near Durham, and I have been with her some months. She even asked me to live with her. She is a well-meaning woman. But I could not do that. She is too narrow ; and peace is just what I never should have there. Besides, all she does for me she does from a sense of duty, I know, not because she cares for me : rather the contrary. So I am still on the lookout for some little hut where I may pass the remainder of my days, and try to forget — if that be possible."

She fixed her eyes on one flower of the wall-paper as she

spoke, not seeking her friend's face for sympathy, but rather as if impelled to say these words; and, at variance as they were with her brilliant appearance, there was nothing in her intonation or manner to indicate to the closest observer that they were said to produce any definite effect.

Mr. Vavasour reflected for a moment.

"I don't know of any cottage vacant about here just at present; but" —

"Oh! I did not come here with the hope of finding one. It was by chance I heard of your living here. I met in Durham a Mr. Englefield, who lives in this county, I believe. He mentioned, in conversation, the name of William Vavasour. I questioned him to make sure it was my old friend, and then resolved I would come here, on my way south, just to see you, and shake hands once more."

"Well, now you are here, Ama — Mrs. Fitzroy, we can't let you run away immediately. You *must* stay and make acquaintance with my Kate. She'll be back on Monday. You'll come up to Laurel Bank, and keep me company till she returns, and we'll drive about the neighborhood, and see if we can hear of a cottage likely to suit you; for, depend on it, you can't do better than settle near us. Now, I won't hear of any excuses. Pay your bill, put

on your bonnet, and take my arm. I'll send down the cart for your boxes at once. This room, what with the heat and the flies, is enough to kill you — pah!"

Mrs. Fitzroy hesitated. "You are very kind, — very kind indeed. But are you sure your daughter will welcome me as you do?"

"Kate? She's the best and warmest-hearted girl in the world. Her father's old friend! — not welcome you? Make your mind perfectly at ease on that score."

And Mrs. Fitzroy made no further objection. She rang the bell, paid her bill, and gave directions to her maid in French, as to following her with her boxes. Then she and Vavasour went out, crossed the Green, and turned up the hill to Laurel Bank; the lady leaning upon Vavasour's arm.

CHAPTER IV.

THE following evening, Saturday, Miss Tarragon had a tea-party, when what Mrs. Loveden romantically termed the "Laurel Bank mystery" was freely discussed.

"I think she must be a Russian princess, travelling in disguise," observed that lady. "The maid is foreign, and you said, Capt. Boycott, there was a smell of Russian leather about her."

"Princess? Stuff!" cried Miss

Tarragon. "She is some woman he knew in Calcutta, depend on it. All the women are overdressed in India — and painted, too, I dare say."

"Painted? Oh, come! she's not painted," remonstrated Capt. Boycott. "I was close to her; I spoke to her, you know."

"Well, she's powdered, at any rate, and her hair is dyed: that I'll declare."

"Jezebel was painted — ugh!" ejaculated the admiral. "I don't like the look of it, at all, coming here in Kate's absence, and taking up her residence with Vavasour. I am not uncharitable, I hope, ma'am; but I don't like the look of it."

"Perhaps she is a relation," hazarded the captain.

"That is too common and innocent a solution for *us*," laughed Mrs. Crowe.

"A. F. — Vavasour has no relation beginning with an F." The admiral shook his head sternly.

"Besides, why not have introduced me when I met them on the road to-day? And why has he asked none of us to dinner? It's devilish odd: that's all I have to say."

"There is something very interesting about her appearance," said Mrs. Loveden in a voice husky from the quantity of hot tea she had been imbibing. "Looks as if there ought to be

some story about her. I can fancy her like Lucretia Borgia, can't you?"

"The Borgias *were* an interesting family," Mrs. Crowe chuckled, "and quite apostolic in their conduct; for they never let their right hand know what their left hand did. Lucretia, if I remember right, was rather given to young lovers. Take care of Alcibiades, my dear."

"Oh! *he* is quite safe;" and the fond mamma smiled, and shook her ringlets. "There is nothing like an *early* attachment as a preservation against the follies of youth."

There was a sly twinkle in Mrs. Crowe's eye, as she said, "Yes, Alcibiades is incapable of folly."

Here Miss Tarragon, apprehensive that the conversation would wander off from the field of general curiosity, into by-paths of private interest, turned like a terrier upon the captain, and snapped at him, —

"What did she have for luncheon at 'The Bell'? of course you asked Mrs. Garfitt, Capt. Boycott."

"A duck and green peas; and her maid had a chicken."

"Gave her maid a chicken? Never heard of such a thing!"

"What sinful extravagance, ma'am!" groaned the admiral. "Wallowing in the flesh-pots of Egypt."

Miss Tarragon resumed her part in the antiphony with a snort. "Why, the duck ought to have been more than enough for them both. A drum-stick is as much as I ever manage. A whole duck and a chicken besides! It's disgusting."

"How you do fall *fowl* of her, my dear," laughed Mrs. Crowe.

"And then 'her dress,'" continued the spinster, heedless of this trivial interruption, and gradually working herself up into a state of rabid exasperation: "it's just like a caricature I saw in a hop-window at Barfield,—tight round her legs, and furbelowed behind. Who ever saw such a frock on a Christian woman? I should be ashamed to be seen in such a garb. Such a designing of the limbs! Such a Pagan costume!"

"She has a very neat foot and ankle," murmured the captain.

"Ankles? A woman may have good ankles, I *hope*, Capt. Boycott, without attracting attention to them in that way." And Miss Tarragon, with her legs crossed in her favorite attitude, kicked at the flimsy garment she styled her "frock," so as to display a good deal more than the sandalled shoes which enclosed her bony feet.

"Woman's dress in the present day, ma'am," said the admiral, "is a grievous sign of the times. It is as the opening of the seventh

seal in the Revelation, ma'am. It shows that the country is lost, done for, doomed!"

"I think Mr. Vavasour should know what we *all* think," said Miss Tarragon, returning to the charge. "I walked up into the garden this morning on purpose to try and see him. I looked through the window, and there was his visitor lying on the sofa. *Lying on the sofa!* That in itself looks bad. No one ever found *me* lying on a sofa. She started up when she saw me, and left the room. Ten minutes later, I heard the wheels of the pony-carriage; and, on inquiry, I found Mr. Vavasour had driven her out."

"Well," said Mrs. Loveden, "I confess *I*, too, walked into the garden this afternoon, in the hope of seeing him and that sweet-looking woman, who feels the want of a little congenial female society, I dare say. But I found from the butler, whom I *managed* to see, that they were gone out walking. I was *so* disappointed! As the admiral says, it certainly *is* odd, none of us being asked there; so unlike Mr. Vavasour!"

"I was as civil as any thing to her," said the captain despondently; "and yet, when I meet them in the road, all Vavasour does is to nod his head, and say, 'How do, Boycott?' and she bows, and they walk on, though my old horse stopped quite natu-

ral — he always does when I meet any one."

"I repeat that Mr. Vavasour ought to be made acquainted with our opinion. Millwood has never been so scandalized before," said Miss Tarragon, stirring her tea virulently.

"I'd advise you to repeat to him all you have been saying, my dear," cried Mrs. Crowe. "He is just the sort of man to snap his fingers in your face."

"Oh, no, no! not snap his fingers! he would not be so *coarse*." Mrs. Loveden's cap fell back in the vehemence of her protestation. "I would write to dear Kate myself, only she is to be back on Monday, and the letter would not reach her at Folkestone."

"She must journey on the sabbath to be here on Monday. I hope you are mistaken, ma'am," growled the admiral. "Sabbath-breaking is another grievous sign of the times."

"She is close to France, at Folkestone: perhaps it's catching," says Mrs. Crowe.

"I hope and believe she sleeps two nights in London, or, perhaps, at York," observed Mrs. Loveden, with a mournfulness of tone to which her hearers had not the key, until she added, "In the days of my affluence, I always broke the journey at York. Breaking a journey is a great thing — when

you have the means. I always travelled with my maid and footman, and had a sitting-room at the hotel. Those are bright gleams, my dear Mrs. Crowe, to look back to over life's thorny path."

"Golden," responded that lady succinctly.

It was a peculiarity in Vavasour, that, though he lived surrounded by gossip, he never seemed to suspect its existence. It came on him as a surprise; he quickly forgot it; and the idea of shaping his conduct with regard to what might be said or thought of it never crossed his mind. Had he been forewarned that every tongue in the neighborhood would be set wagging by the fact of his having invited Mrs. Fitzroy to stay at Laurel Bank during Kate's absence, he would have been indignant, and, in the first heat of the moment, would have used some strong expressions; but it would not have influenced his actions in the very least. As it was, they were influenced by two causes. In avoiding his neighbors, and introducing his visitor to no one, he was acting according to Mrs. Fitzroy's express desire; and he was enjoying, as he certainly had never before enjoyed, uninterrupted intercourse with a woman of rare conversational charm, between whom and himself there existed certain links in

the past which made the most trivial recollections delightful, of which no third person could understand the significance. It was natural that Vavasour, good-natured and hospitable as he always was, should gladly obey his visitor's behests; but why Mrs. Fitzroy, a woman of the world, who knew very well in what light her avoidance of Millwood society would be regarded, — why she should knowingly bring this hornet's nest about her ears, it was not easy to understand. What she said was this: —

"I am unused to the small-talk of an English village. I have lived so long out of England, — out of the world, I may say, — that I feel sure the good old ladies here will look on me as a savage, and will ask me all sorts of questions I cannot answer. Until your daughter comes, do keep them away from me, will you, my dear friend? There was a tall masculine lady who looked in at the window upon me just now: I really felt quite frightened. Do you let them all do that?"

"Well, it is a way they've got," said the master of the house apologetically; "but they won't come in. They sha'n't bother you. Till Kate comes, we will be quiet." And so, even at the church-door on Sunday morning, Vavasour and his guest passed

swiftly among the lingering congregation; and no one was presented to the lady, whose name the village by this time learned was Mrs. Fitzroy.

On the same morning came a letter from Kate, which gave her father momentary annoyance, not with her, but with himself, because he *might* have written to her on Friday, and had not done so. The letter announced that Kate's return was delayed till Wednesday. It had been arranged that she should leave Folkestone on Saturday, and pass Sunday in London with some cousins; then, by the six-o'clock-train on Monday morning (early rising was no hardship to Kate), she would reach home at mid-day. But, owing to illness, her cousins had left London suddenly, and had telegraphed to her on Friday to that effect. Her aunt objected to Kate's going to a hotel; and it chanced that a friend of Lady Clive's, who was at Folkestone, was returning to her home, close to Doncaster, on Tuesday. She offered to take Kate so far, and that she should sleep at this lady's house, — a proposal, which, as Lady Clive was urgent that she should accept it, her niece did not like to refuse. "I hope you will not mind my taking these two extra days' leave of absence," she wrote; "but Aunt Jane was so distressed at the idea of my being

alone at a London hotel, — as if she expected I should be run away with, — that I had scarcely a choice in the matter. But I am so impatient to see you, dear father, again, and am afraid you must be so lonely, that I am annoyed at the delay. Besides, I have a great deal to tell you, more than I could possibly put into a letter. Aunt Jane has been very kind, *too* kind, almost; but there is no one to whom I can talk quite openly, who understands me, in short, like my own dear father.”

It was absurd, as Vavasour said to himself; but this letter seemed a tacit reproach to him. He had *not* felt lonely without Kate for the last two days; and he had not written to her, as he might have done, on Friday, after his guest's arrival. It is true the letter which he would have directed to London would not have reached her, and now it was useless to write: being two days' post to Folkestone, she would probably have left that place before his letter arrived there. It was, in reality, of no importance, and his was not a nature to magnify and disquiet itself about trifles. He muttered “Tiresome!” once or twice, after reading Kate's letter, but suffered it to trouble him no more.

. Not so lightly, however, was Miss Vavasour's delayed return passed over by Millwood society.

It was ominous. Who could tell whether she would ever return *at all*, as long as “this person” was at Laurel Bank? Mrs. Loveden had her own private reasons for lamentation. The days of Alcibiades' departure were at hand. His uniform had arrived, and he looked quite lovely in it. If he had to gird on his sword, and be off to the wars, — there were no wars; but that was immaterial, — without Kate's beholding him, without her hearing from his lips the avowal of his undying affection, might not the happiness of two young lives be forever blasted?

By dint of a mild persistence, and untiring vigilance, she had succeeded, where Miss Tarragon's more aggressive impertinence had failed. She had prowled about the garden in dark places, watching for her opportunity, till she had surprised Vavasour and his guest among the gooseberry-bushes in the kitchen-garden; and, hedged in as they were with asparagus-beds on the other side, there was no escape: he *had* to introduce the two ladies with the best grace he could. Her veil caught among the gooseberry-bushes, and her scarf fluttered away among the asparagus; and there was something so comical about the draggled ringleted lady's appearance and manner altogether, that Mrs. Fitzroy, at first annoyed at the intrusion, could not help laughing. Mrs.

Loveden's own account of the interview was almost hysterical.

"So very sweet and so refined! Such a dignity blent, as one may say, with mirthfulness! Such a romantic *something* about her altogether, my dear, that I was completely fascinated. I hope there's nothing wrong—I can't believe it; I can't *indeed*. Nothing could be nicer than she was; and—and I found out that Kate is *really* and *truly* coming on Wednesday. Mr. Vavasour told me so distinctly, and seemed half vexed when I *pressed* the point. But, for all that, he did *not* ask Alcibiades and me to dinner, as he so often does when we meet. And I thought it *odd*; for I gave him an *opening*."

"And he shut you up?" said Mrs. Crowe.

"Well, he said that he and his old friend—he called her his old friend—had so much to talk over in past times, that they preferred being *alone* till Kate's return. He said it in that odd, abrupt way of his; and of course I felt, after that, that I couldn't stay. I have too much delicacy of feeling. My mission was accomplished. I had learnt that Kate was *really* expected home, and I had afforded Mrs. Fitzroy an opportunity of female sympathy, should she desire it."

Those five evenings and four clear days went swiftly by with Vavasour. Into whatever shallow

groove the conversation slid, Mrs. Fitzroy was always at home, and ready with her quota of anecdote and observation, differing occasionally from her host, but with such a delicate tact as rendered discussion only a more subtle charm than unanimity of opinion. They sat out on the terrace, and took their coffee there after dinner; and then Mrs. Fitzroy went to the piano, played bits of Bach and Beethoven, and sang her friend the old songs that he had loved to hear her sing when a girl. There never were any melodies like "The Meeting of the Waters," and "I saw from the Beach," to his thinking: he never was tired of hearing them. Mrs. Fitzroy's voice was a contralto, of no great power or extent; but it had retained its sweetness, and was more pleasant to listen to on summer nights, like these, than many a finer organ. At least, so thought the middle-aged man who leaned against the window, smoking his cigar, and watching the beautiful contour of the singer, but dimly lit in the corner of the room. How he regretted that Kate could not sing! How he wished that his child was gifted like Mrs. Fitzroy. In the limits of a single minute, men may experience the sharpness of a disappointment of which they have daily felt, for years, the blunt edges only.

CHAPTER V.

ON Wednesday, at noon, Capt. Boycott was at his accustomed post. It was assumed that her father would be at the station to meet Kate, and that the chances of "enlightening her" as to the condition of affairs during the last few days would be consequently small. It was no great exercise of self-denial, therefore, on the part of the ladies to abstain from accompanying the captain. There was a common though tacit understanding, that they should all walk "accidentally" in the Laurel Bank grounds about the time that Kate might be expected to arrive.

To the good captain's surprise, however, when he reached the station, in a bath of decomposition from the heat, the Vavasour phaeton and ponies, with the groom, were waiting for their young mistress; but the master himself was not there. In reply to the captain's inquisition, the groom told him that Mr. Vavasour had walked out with Mrs. Fitzroy. The bell rang at the same moment: the train puffed up. As ill-luck would have it, the porter, expectant of Miss Vavasour's return, was swift to open the door; and, before the captain could offer his arm, Kate had sprung to the platform, and was looking rapidly up and down.

"Welcome back, my dear Miss Kate! Your papa is not here; but" —

"All right, Capt. Boycott. How d'ye do? There, carry my shawls, will you? I see the phaeton. Come along, Anne; make haste. The luggage, you know, will all come in the cart. How d'ye do, William? All well at home? Lilly and Snowdrop are looking very fat. Ah! they want more exercise."

She jumped in, and seized the reins.

"Vavasour, you know, would have come, I feel sure, my dear Miss Kate, if—if" —

"He's not ill?" said Kate quickly.

"Oh, dear, no! He's quite well; but" —

"As long as he is well, I don't care. Now get in, Anne. Thank you, Capt. Boycott. I can't stay a moment longer, I am in such a hurry to get home."

She flicked Lilly and Snowdrop's white flanks, smiled and nodded to the captain, and was down the road, and out of sight, before the latter had recovered his breath and presence of mind.

"I ought to have prepared her a bit," he said to himself reproachfully. "Miss Tarragon would have done so, now, before she'd got into the phaeton, nimble as Miss Kate is. But women are altogether too quick for men:

that's about the truth of it. While I was thinking how I could lead up to it, as one may say, she was off. Miss Kate always was a teaser at taking me up before the words were half out o' my mouth. Well, I may as well walk up now to Laurel Bank. I'll be bound they are all there."

And while the captain toiled along under the inadequate shadow of the hedgerow, reducing his silk pocket-handkerchief gradually to the dimensions and consistency of a moist ball, Kate, with her glad spirit unclouded by a suspicion or a care, was driving her white and willing little slaves up to the hall-door of Laurel Bank with a mathematical precision of curve worthy of a royal state-coachman.

The old butler was upon the steps, waiting to receive his young mistress.

"How d'ye do, Davis? But I needn't ask, you are looking so well. Is papa in?"

"No, miss, I think not; but he won't be long fust. He ordered luncheon earlier to-day, on your account."

A large Newfoundland bounded out of the shrubbery, and, jumping up, laid his fore-paws on Kate's shoulders.

"Why, Lion! Dear old fellow! You nearly knocked me down. I'm very glad to see you, dear; yes, very glad. It seems such a

time since I felt your cold nose against my hand!"

Kate entered the house, followed by the dog, walked into the drawing-room, and sat down, a little, just a very little disappointed. Whenever she had returned home after an absence, before this, her father had either been at the station to greet her, or, at all events, on the porch-steps. To many fathers and daughters, this may seem ridiculous; but the relations in which this particular father and daughter stood to each other were not common. Mr. Vavasour and Kate were so deeply attached, that demonstrations which appear to be uncalled for in the ordinary intercourse of parents with their grown children were, in this case, needed and given reciprocally, without being rationalized about. Kate, like her father, however, was too sensible to magnify the dimensions of such a momentary disappointment as this. She took off her hat, and looked round. How pretty her home seemed after the Folkestone lodging! How bright and peaceful their dear old drawing-room was, with the breath of mignonette and sweet-peas blown in at the open window, and the cooing of her ringdoves from their dovecote on the lawn!

The girl stooped, and put her arms round the dog's neck, who sat resting his nose affectionately upon her knees.

"Somebody's eyes are like yours, Lion, — honest, steadfast eyes; yes, they are, dear! And somebody's character is like yours, — brave, and yet gentle and modest. *You* never put yourself forward, and make a vulgar noise, like common dogs; do you, dear? You're proud and retiring, except when your mistress is concerned; and I know, I am *sure*, that somebody will act like you by and by. Ah, you flop your tail! you agree, wise, dear old Lion!"

She rose; and her eye fell on the open piano. She was surprised. Some music lay upon the desk. She took it up: it was one of the "*Lieder ohne Worte*." Who could have been here? Even while she asked herself this question, a sharp, decisive step came along the gravel terrace; and a tall, angular form, surmounted by a garden hat like the thatched roof of a house, leaned in on the window.

"So you are come home at last, Kate. High time, my dear. You are not returned before you were wanted. I thought I would just step up and see if you were arrived. Why, how brown you are! the sea air. You should take care of your complexion, as I do. Well, you've seen your father, I suppose?"

"No, Miss Tarragon: he is out. I hope every one in the village is well. How is poor little Tommy Miles?"

"Oh, better! Every one is well enough." (This was dismissed as though physical health were of no moment compared with that moral canker which was eating into the constitution of Millwood.) "Only our minds have been troubled of late: I don't mind telling you that. Come out here, Kate: I can talk to you better in the garden."

So Kate, smiling to herself, went out and wandered about the lawn, beside the gaunt spinster, who drew Kate's arm within her own, as she continued, —

"It's about this lady, my dear."

"What lady?" said Kate simply.

Miss Tarragon stopped dead-short, faced round, and looked her companion sharply in the face.

"Do you mean to say, Kate, that your father has not written to you about — about this person he has had here nearly a week?"

"Is there any one here? Papa thought I left Folkestone on Saturday, and so, of course, did not write to me. Who is here?"

Miss Tarragon compressed her lips tightly, faced round again, and walked on, stabbing the lawn with her parasol as she went along.

"We *understand* that the lady's name is Mrs. Fitzroy, Kate; though your father has most pointedly avoided ever introducing her to any one, — except that

leech, Mrs. Loveden, who literally *forced* him to do so. I abstain from making any remark. I only point out to you the fact that she has been here since *Friday*, and to-day is *Wednesday*, — time enough for a letter to get to the other end of Europe."

Kate burst out laughing.

"What *do* you mean, Miss Tarragon? If papa has had any one to keep him company these last few days, do you think I am not too delighted? And, if he did not write to me, I know perfectly well there was some good reason for it."

"Very well, Kate: let it be exactly as you please. If you choose to regard it in that light, it is no business of mine. Only do not imagine that the world will do so: that is all. Here comes Mrs. Crowe. Ask her what *she* thinks, what all the *respectable* portion of Millwood think, about this Mrs. Fitzroy."

"How are you, my dear?" cried Mrs. Crowe. "Talking about Mrs. Fitzroy? Ah! when the cat's away, the mice *will* play. All men are alike. Your papa's no worse than the rest, my love."

"Worse! He's a thousand times better than any one else I ever met, whether man or woman, Mrs. Crowe!" exclaimed Kate with animation. "What is it that has made you all so angry with him? I cannot make out."

"Then you're a fool, Kate!" said Miss Tarragon without an instant's hesitation.

"That's Jane Tarragon's way of putting things, my dear," struck in Mrs. Crowe. "*I* should say you have no knowledge of the world. You see, it is not usual for gentlemen to have mysterious ladies staying with them, whom they present to none of their friends. It may be foolish; but the prejudices of society are against it. I am sure I, for my part, say nothing. The poor woman may be a saint (I dare say she is), only, judged by a mundane standard, her conduct is — odd."

"So I think many people are," rejoined Kate composedly. "I am glad you have nothing to say against papa's friend, Mrs. Crowe."

Here Mrs. Loveden and Alcibiades approached rapidly down a side-path.

"My dearest, sweetest Kate!" And she fell into the girl's arms, who had no choice but to receive and support her. "This is indeed — after this long absence — to clasp you to my arms once more!"

What her utterances may have lost in coherence they gained in pathos; each hiatus being filled by sobs. Her shawl took this opportunity to slip off; and her bonnet fell back, as it could not help doing, in the violence of her embrace.

"How d'y'e do, Alcibiades?" said Kate, extending her hand, as soon as she had succeeded in propping up Mrs. Loveden.

The lanky youth suffered his hand to be shaken, and grinned.

"How do, Kate? I am to join on the 31st. It's awfully jolly. There's lots of fun at Chatham, they tell me,—a theatre, and billiards, and things"—

"You don't mean that, my darling boy.—He doesn't mean that, Kate. His heart is broken at leaving Millwood and all that is most dear to him; but his gallant spirit heaves at the thought of fighting for his country.—Doesn't it, Alcibiades?"

"It's precious slow here," said the hero.

"So it is," laughed Kate. "If I was a boy—I beg your pardon—a young man, I am sure I should think so; nothing but petticoats and two or three elderly gentlemen. You will be twice as happy at Chatham with your regiment."

"Happy! Oh, no, my love! not *happy* when parted from—from *us*, Kate: I may say it, —from *us*. A stern sense of duty may support him under the trial; but his heart will bleed.—Will it not, my boy?"

"He jests at scars that never felt a wound," murmured Mrs. Crowe, before Alcibiades could reply; and then continued, "But my high opinion of you is dimin-

ished, Alcibiades. I am sure I caught you trying to peep under Mrs. Fitzroy's bonnet in church."

"Oh, Mrs. Crowe!"

"Oh, how cruel! How can you?" ejaculated his wounded parent. "Dear innocent! And that sweet woman! Ah, Kate, I dare say *you* know all about her history. *You* can tell us what the romance is about her."

"I don't know that there is any romance at all. I'll ask papa, if you like it," said Kate, half-laughing, half angry.

"Oh, my dear, don't say *I* said so! I feel certain there is nothing wrong—oh, quite certain!"

"Come, that is a comfort," said Kate. "I have found two persons to declare that they do not believe papa's friend is a murderess, or any thing else dreadful. It only rests with you, Miss Tarragon, to"—

"Oh, don't say it is me! *I* make no charge. Why should I? I may have my own opinion; I may think such conduct on your father's part demands some explanation: but I defy you to say that *I* accuse Mrs. Fitzroy. Here comes the admiral, however; appeal to him."

"I do not require to appeal to any one," said Kate gravely. "You all mean very kindly, I feel sure; but"—

"You cannot doubt *me*, Kate?" cries Mrs. Loveden.

"Forewarned is fore-armed." says Mrs. Crowe.

"It is for your own good, child," joins in Miss Tarragon. "It can be nothing to *us*. — Admiral, tell Kate what *you*, a distinguished officer and a good churchman, and a man of the world, think about Mrs. Fitzroy. *Our* opinion goes for nothing, of course. *We* are women, prejudiced and jealous, I suppose."

"Oh! I have nothing to say about Mrs. Fitzroy," replies the veteran testily, and with a pusillanimity that goes far to invalidate his claim to "a clasp." "Don't drag me into your discussion, Miss Tarragon. I hate evil speaking. I don't know what society is coming to: that's all I say."

"It is gratifying to find that you are all of one mind," says Kate, with a merry twinkle in her eye. "However ill-natured the world may be, I am sure our intimate friends could never be so about papa, who is so uniformly kind and generous about every one. I hear his voice calling me, — Papa, papa! Here I am. I am coming." And she ran across the lawn to the house; while the noble army of martyrs in the cause of scandal retired discomfited, but consoled themselves by giving vent with increased acerbity to the suspicions the unrestrained utterance of which had

been checked by the noble-hearted girl.

The father met his daughter in the conservatory, and led her into his study. When their first greetings were over, he said —

"Have you heard, Kate, that I have had a visitor here since Friday?"

"I have, papa; and I am so glad! I am dying to know all about her."

"I ought to have written to you; but the post-hour slipped by on Friday, and, after that, it was too late to write. Mrs. Fitzroy, you must know, Kate, is the oldest friend I have left alive."

"You don't say so, papa! Then she is a very old lady?"

Vavasour laughed. "No! Though I suppose I am a very old gentleman in your eyes, I don't think even *you* can call Mrs. Fitzroy old. The fact is (I'll tell you a secret, Kate), we were engaged when I was six and twenty, and she was seventeen. Her friends were naturally averse to her marrying a penniless young fellow. It was broken off, and I went to India. She married shortly after, and I lost sight of her completely. I never could hear what had become of her. Judge, then, of my surprise, when a note was brought to me from 'The Bell,' last Friday, telling me that the Amabel Taylor of old times, now Mrs. Fitzroy, was there!"

"How curious!" said Kate. "What brought her to Millwood?"

"She was travelling from the North, and heard, by accident, that I lived here. It was not much out of her way, and she came to pass a few hours at 'The Bell,' and shake hands with me. Of course, I insisted on her coming up here and paying us a visit. I assured her that you would be as delighted as I was to receive your father's old friend."

"Of course, papa; and I am so glad, that, instead of moping here without me these last few days, you have had a nice companion!"

"She is the most agreeable woman I ever met, Kate, not the least like the girl I knew twenty-seven years ago; all the difference between a pale sketch and a highly-finished, richly-toned picture. If it was not for her smile, and the peculiar ring in her voice, I should hardly know her. But her voice! Ah, there's no mistaking that! Her singing — by Jove! her singing, Kate, *will* delight you."

"You will make one quite envious, papa," said Kate, laughing; "and I shall be so cowed before this paragon of perfection, that I shall not be able to open my lips. Can she ride across-country?"

"No!" said Vavasour, pinching her cheek. "She has nothing of the Amazon about her. She is

retiring and reserved, at least she shrinks from general society. She has suffered a great deal, poor thing; and, though she speaks but little about herself, one sees that she has lost the spirit and courage for verbal encounters with women like Miss Tarragon and Mrs. Crowe. I introduced that absurd old woman Loveden to her, because I couldn't help it, and her maudlin sentimentality could not hurt my poor friend. But all the others I have kept off. So we have passed our mornings and evenings *tête-à-tête*; and uncommonly pleasant they have been."

"And now I have come to spoil them," said Kate, throwing her arms around her father's neck. "There's the luncheon-bell! And I have not even smoothed my hair. What will your paragon think of me, papa?"

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. FITZROY was not at all the sort of looking woman Kate's imagination had conjured up. What her father had said of his friend's trials, and of her shrinking from society, had disposed his daughter to look for a pale, sad-looking person, clad in fashions of two years ago, rather than the brilliant beauty, simply but exquisitely attired, who came forth and embraced her.

"Your father has been so kind to me!" she said, "and has tried to make me feel that I was not in his way while you were absent. But I am so glad you are come! It will give him more leisure while I remain here (for he insists on my remaining a little longer). I hope you don't mind?"

"Well, Mrs. Fitzroy," said Kate gayly, "if you knew what female society generally falls to my lot, you need have no vanity to believe I shall be charmed to have you as a companion, even if you were *not* papa's old friend. Has he lionized you properly? Has he done his duty by driving you to the 'Dyke' and the Roman Camp? Papa's dreadfully lazy about driving; and I see the ponies have grown as fat as pigs in my absence."

"Listen to the character this filial child gives of her father!" cried Vavasour. "I appeal to you, Ama — Mrs. Fitzroy. Have I not pounded the roads and lanes every morning, and flogged those white mice up the hills every afternoon?"

"You have indeed," said the lady, smiling; "and I am not surprised to observe, from the manner in which you proclaim your good deeds, that you regard them as a penance which entitles you to *indulgences* for the future. Well, your daughter will drive me, I dare say."

"Not at all: I won't have it. I didn't mean that, you *know* I didn't," laughed Vavasour. "I have heard of a cottage which sounds as if it would just suit you, five miles off. I mean to drive you there to-morrow morning."

"Are you thinking of settling in this neighborhood?" asked Kate, a little surprised. Fancy this splendid butterfly settling down among the dowdy old moths of Millwood!

"If I could find something very cheap and very quiet," said Mrs. Fitzroy.

Kate could not quite make out her new acquaintance. But she was captivated by her; and the longer she remained under the influence of her voice and eyes, and tender, playful geniality, the more complete was the fascination. It was only when she had reached the solitude of her own room at night, and thought calmly, — when, so to speak, the stage-lamps were lowered, and the cold, gray, light of reason shone in from above, — that she felt a little dissatisfied as to the entire reality of the impersonation which she had never questioned, so long as it was on the stage. Was it possible that a lovely woman, as Mrs. Fitzroy still was, exercising a potent spell on whomsoever she approached, and honestly showing that she was not averse to exer-

cise it, should seriously desire to avoid all society, to immure herself, and lead the life of a recluse? If so, why? Whatever her troubles had been (and when Kate looked into her eyes, at times she could not doubt that Mrs. Fitzroy *had* passed through severe ones), they had not clouded her conversational brilliancy, nor dimmed her power of enjoyment in music, in books, and—in dress. Was all that expensive simplicity consistent with poverty and seclusion? Kate's frank and cordial acceptance of her father's friend, whom she warmly admired, was jarred when her clear judgment encountered it, and asked this question. And one thing had been a very positive annoyance to her, she had found it absolutely impossible to have an hour's conversation alone with her father. Except for those few minutes before luncheon, they had only been together in Mrs. Fitzroy's presence. He had proposed that the two ladies should drive; and Kate could not refuse. Then had come afternoon tea, and, after that, he had asked Mrs. Fitzroy to walk up the hill, and see the sunset; and then dressing-time had come, and dinner; and Kate found that she had been ten hours at home without unburthening herself to her father of the secret that lay at her heart.

This could not go on: not all the

Mrs. Fitzroys in the world must come between Kate and her father. And yet, had she not been so resolute, the following day would, probably, have slipped by in much the same manner.

After breakfast, Vavasour said, —

"Now, Mrs. Fitzroy, when shall you be ready for our drive? Shall I say in half an hour?"

"Whenever you please," replied his guest.

"Papa," said Kate, after an instant's hesitation, "do you mind saying in an hour? I have only had five minutes alone with you since I came back."

Mrs. Fitzroy instantly left the room.

"You shouldn't have said that, Kate, before Mrs. Fitzroy. It sounded as if you had found her *de trop*."

"She is too sensible to think so. I only meant that I *do* want to talk to you, papa; and it seemed to me I should never get an hour of you to myself, if I did not speak out."

"Well, well, my darling! What is it, eh? Nothing amiss? You look grave."

"Nothing is amiss, papa; and, if I look grave, it is not because I am in any trouble: on the contrary, I am happier than I ever was before. I am grave, because my happiness is serious, papa, and because I don't want you to think

that what I am going to say is — is a giddy child's fancy."

"Bless my soul, Kate!" said her father, taking her hand, and looking into her eyes. "What is it? Not — not" —

The eyes returned an affirmative look, and the lips parted with a smile.

"Sit down, and let me tell you every thing, papa."

"Who is he? Tell me that first."

"His name is Douglas, — Christian Douglas. He is in the army, and is quartered at Shorncliff. We met nearly every day."

"The deuse you did! Did your Aunt Emily approve? Did she encourage it?"

"No, I cannot say she encouraged it; but she had nothing to say against him, papa."

"Nothing to say *against* him? Hem! Your aunt is a shrewd woman, Kate, besides being a good one. Did she *like* him?"

"In a way, she did. Of course, I tell you *every thing*, papa. She used to say he was a puzzle to her; that there was a cloud over him; at times, she could not account for, and a certain constraint. I think she would have liked an older man (he is only four and twenty), and of higher position. Dear Aunt Emily believes there is nothing good enough for me, you know. She used to go on about his being only

a poor subaltern. What *does* that signify? At the same time, she took pains to learn all she could about him; and then there was but one opinion, — that he was a generous, noble-hearted young man. As to me — if you want *my* opinion, papa, I can only say I have never met any man, except you, to compare with him; and, if I don't marry him, I shall never marry at all. The worst of it is" (here she buried her face on her father's shoulder), "I do not feel quite, *quite* sure whether he will ask me to marry him."

"Bless my heart, Kate, are you mad? What, *you*, of all girls in the world, confess to your love for a fellow who has not first said *he loves you?*"

"I want to explain to you, papa, how I think it is with him. You see, people called me 'an heiress' at Folkestone. Mr. Douglas is not rich; and that made him sensitive, I fancy, to what people might say. If any one came to speak to me when he was by, he generally got up and walked away. He seemed determined not to interfere with any other man. He would go off into a corner, and watch me while I danced, and, perhaps, only ask me once himself. He often looked depressed, as if something was on his mind. But I *know* he cares for me, papa: I am quite sure of it. And what makes me so happy is

this, that I believe he thinks it right to speak to *you*, before he says a word to me."

"What makes you think that?"

"When I was going away, he asked whether I thought you would allow him to call here, on his way to Scotland, some day in the course of next week. I found he knew exactly where we lived, and about the trains, and that he could pass a couple of hours here, and join the night-express at Doncaster. But I said, that, if he came here, I was sure you would be glad if he staid the night at least. Did I do right, papa?"

"Why, yes — yes, I suppose so. Of course, if he were *only* an acquaintance, I'd write and ask him to come for as long as he cared to stay. But, as it is, I suppose that wouldn't do. No, I can't have my Kate trifled with; and I can't appear to be begging for a husband, hang it all! But, if he comes, why, of course I'll ask him to stay. What is he like, Kate? Good looking, of course, eh?"

"Well, papa, I'll describe him. He is tall, and rather fair, with nice, honest eyes, like — like Lion's. I don't know whether you would call him exactly handsome; but he looks like a soldier and — a gentleman."

"Hem! Is he clever?"

"Well, he — he — leaps beautifully."

"Leaps! Is that all?"

"And is the fastest runner in the camp. I don't know that he is exactly *clever*; but he is not a bit dull. Oh, no! And he is adored in his regiment. They all said so, and that he is a first-rate soldier, and is sure to be a distinguished man some day. He has a great deal of *character*, you see, papa; and that is more than just common cleverness — don't you think so?"

"Well, I think it is. He is poor, you say? I don't care for that. Do you know any thing of his family? Scotch, of course."

"Yes. But I know nothing more, except that his father and mother are both dead, and that he has no near relations alive."

"Hem! Well, I am not ambitious for you, Kate. You know that I think happiness comes before every thing; and, if I felt sure that yours would be secured by this marriage, I'd put my hand into the fire to bring it about. But I can understand now your aunt Emily not finding much to say in his favor. A young fellow who has neither money, nor talent, nor connection, not even remarkable for his good looks! — well, this is not quite the husband I should have *selected* for you, Kate; though if he loves you, and you are bent on it, I sha'n't oppose it, providing, always, that I am satisfied, after making due inquiries about the young fellow."

"You will be satisfied, dear papa: I have no fear of that," said Kate, throwing her arms round his neck.

"Well, my Katie, I can't pretend to say that I don't wish the young man would stop away — except for your sake, except for your sake, my pet," he repeated, as though he feared he would hurt her. "I didn't think, you see, that you meant to fly away from me so soon; and we old fellows get selfish."

"I don't want ever to fly away from you, papa; and, if I must, I hope they will be short flights, and that I shall be constantly returning to the dear old nest."

"All the same," returned Vavasour with a sigh, "I shall feel very lonely. These last two months have shown me that; for I wouldn't have a man who is a soldier at heart give up his profession because he marries. And so, if this is to be, I must make up my mind to my solitude, Kate. That is the long and short of it."

CHAPTER VII.

THE cottage, which was the ostensible object of Vavasour's drive with Mrs. Fitzroy, was a failure, regarded as a favorable residence for a lady, and not a water-rat; seeing that even now, in the height of summer, its walls

were coated with mildew, and that the pond on the edge of which the cottage stood was covered by what looked like an impenetrable carpet of verdigris, only stirred at rare intervals by a tadpole.

No: Mrs. Fitzroy might desire a romantic and inexpensive seclusion; but this meant nothing less than rheumatism for life. Vavasour at once decided for her that it was not to be thought of.

But the drive was not barren of other and more important results, though they were neither tangible nor immediate. Succeeding, as they did, Kate's avowal to her father, those hours of soothing companionship, *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Fitzroy, acted upon Vavasour much as genial sunshine does upon fruit-trees after wild spring winds and rain. The blossoms have been scattered: in their place, the fruit begins to form. The existence of its germ was indicated by those last words of Vavasour's to his daughter: "I shall feel very lonely. If this is to be, I must make up my mind to my solitude." Some unconscious cerebral action had been going on, no doubt, during the six previous days, which prevented his being startled when the question now presented itself to his mind, "Why *should* I remain solitary? If my child leaves me, as is but right and natural, to form other ties, why should I be debarred from a companionship which would

be the comfort of my declining years? Amabel is the only woman I have ever loved. Years have proved that it was more than a boyish passion. Now that we are both middle-aged, instead of being amazed at my infatuation, I only feel how different life would have been, had it been passed with *her*. She seems a hundred times more charming to me now than as I remember her twenty-six years ago. She is free; she is poor; and, unless I am grievously mistaken, she, too, regrets the past, and feels, that, as my wife, she would have been happier than she has been. Is it too late? Unless Kate marries, I shall never do so. She has always reigned here: I will never destroy her supremacy. But if she goes" —

Vavasour's thoughts were in this wise as he drove along; and he was more silent than usual: but his companion seemed perfectly content, and did not try to "make conversation." The reliance on unexpressed sympathy is the surest indication of intimacy having reached the stage when effort is needless: the harbor-bar is passed, and a haven of serene security attained.

Because we have come to a stage in our narrative when the reader may begin to regard Mrs. Fitzroy as no better than a "Becky Sharp," — a clever, heartless actress, — we will read *her* thoughts

also (or some of her thoughts; for they are complex) as she rolls along beside the lover of her youth, a happier, more hopeful woman than she has been for many a long day. Yet she has far more cause to regret the past, bitterly and repentingly, than *he* has. And she has regretted it for years, though never, perhaps, with the poignancy she has felt during certain hours of the past week. And yet she has prospered so far, and is sanguine of ultimate success. She came here with the forlorn hope of trying to regain her ascendancy over the man who loved her as a girl, and towards whom her thoughts have so often turned tenderly, gratefully, — *respectfully*, if we may use the term. What a fine, honorable, true young fellow he was! how unlike those whose lives had crossed hers afterwards! Ah! if she had but remained constant to him, in spite of opposition, absence, and poverty, how different might her life have been! how different might she herself be! Nothing could obliterate the past, nor still the cry of remorse that would make itself heard as long as life itself should last. But there was a rift in the clouds; and a golden sunset appeared possible, now, after the day's darkness, — a sunset peaceful and unstirred, beneath the roof of the man whose love had gilded the memory of life,

and her inconstancy to whom had led to all her after-sorrows.

Yes, she had come here for a set purpose. But, with all her faults, she was not of the stuff of which designing widows are made, who haunt watering-places and foreign *tables d'hôte*, seeking whom they may devour. Poor as she was, and friendless,—a “waif and a stray,” as she had truly styled herself,—she was too proud to have laid siege to any but the one man in whom she had never been deceived; whose name was an abiding monument to manly virtue, under the shadow of which she felt that she could sit down, and rest content, and protected from the world's scorching glare. She knew her own power. Unless William Vavasour were an utterly changed man, she could obtain an influence over him; not the same as in former years, perhaps, but one in which the judgment should be equally captive, though the senses were less so; and, if this should come to pass, she knew full well, too, that she could make him happy. The injury she had wrought to both in former years should be repaired. It was still, as it had ever been, necessary to her nature to be the first object in some one's affection. This craving had brought her much misery through life; for it had never been satisfied. She was the altar before which no steady-burning

lamp of constancy had been lighted; but the torches of passion had flared, and died out quickly. Wise women accept what ashes of love they can scrape up when the fire is dead. But Amabel Fitzroy had not been a wise woman. Her pride, her vanity, nay, her very virtues themselves, rose in revolt. She was capable of self-sacrifice, of noble deeds, and generous forgiveness: she could not submit to neglect. Her lot had cast her into stormy places. The seed that she had looked should bear her devotion had brought forth selfishness and ingratitude. At forty-three, the only heart over which she knew that she had reigned absolutely supreme was the heart of this man, which she had so sorely wounded six and twenty years ago. If she could regain that supremacy, might it not be well with her, even at the eleventh hour? She no longer asked to shine in the world: she had truly said she shrank from it. She neglected none of the arts by which her personal charms, which she knew must be on the wane, were heightened; but it was not for the sake of the world's homage. She sought dominion, but it was the dominion over one man who should be absolutely hers; and, after long years of estrangement, she had found him.

The sole cause of disquietude

was this: her own observation had confirmed what Vavasour had said, — his daughter was, at present, all in all to him. Would she yield her father, without a struggle, to another woman? If Kate combated the growing influence of another woman in the house, Mrs. Fitzroy knew that she must retire. Indeed, she recoiled before the idea of discord and jealousy. She had had enough of them in her life. Could she bring the girl cordially to accept her? That was the question; and it was one which she did not, as yet, feel sufficient confidence to answer in the affirmative. Women, she knew, are distrustful of each other; and though it was easy to see that Kate was an open-hearted, unsuspecting girl, she was not weak, not to be led this way or that, unless it were by her affections, or by the guidance of her honest good sense. Mrs. Fitzroy felt sincerely drawn towards the girl: she would soon grow attached to her, she was sure; and she had known too little sympathetic companionship among her own sex not to value it highly. But, though she might fascinate Kate, Mrs. Fitzroy was not so sure that the girl could be brought to love her. With the unerring instinct of a clever woman not blinded by vanity, she saw that there were limits of liking it might be more difficult to pass in the heart of a

frank, unsophisticated girl than in many a citadel whose outworks were more complicated. Mrs. Fitzroy felt that what was her strength now in her life-battle with others was her weakness in her relations with Kate. The elder was an impenetrable woman of the world; the younger, transparent in all her words and actions. If Mrs. Fitzroy could cast aside her armor, fall upon the young girl's neck, and tell her all the story of her sad life, she knew that Kate's warm heart would soften towards her. But this she dared not do. She must trust to other means to win this ally over to the camp.

Kate, meanwhile, incautiously venturing into the garden without first spying out the land, had fallen an easy prey to Mrs. Loveden, who was lying in ambush for her.

"You felt that I should be here, now, did you not, my Kate? And you expected Alcibiades too" —

"Indeed I didn't."

"He would have been here, my love, but for his martial exercises."

"What are they, Mrs. Loveden?"

"A sergeant comes over from the Barfield barracks twice a week, and drills him. It is arduous work — the attainment of a military carriage — to one of Alcibiades' refined, delicate frame. I left him on the sofa, prostrate with

exertion, and warm, *very* warm. In the days of my affluence, Kate, I should have *driven* him here in my carriage, with my own footman; but" —

"Drive up from the village here? A boy like Alcibiades! My dear Mrs. Loveden!"

"But he is prostrate, my love. I gave him a cup of tea, and told him to keep quiet. Where are my gloves? Oh, thank you! Ardently as he desired to accompany me, I felt sure that—that you" —

"Would think he was better where he was? Certainly. Why drag him up here in the heat, when he is hot already?"

"Why, he has so few days left now, my love; and I am so anxious you should see him in his regimentals, — the very *picture* of a young warrior, Kate! He will 'off to the wars, away,' wearing his ladye's colors at his breast. He will obey the stern call of duty, my love; but his heart — his heart will remain here!"

Kate scarcely knew how to put an end to this rubbish, of which she found it difficult to pretend not to understand the drift. She said she felt sure, that, as an affectionate son, his heart would constantly turn to Millwood; and that she sympathized with Mrs. Loveden, in this her first separation from Alcibiades.

"I am as the mother of the Gracchi, Kate, — I offer up my jewel, my all, to my country. So noble, so gifted! Ah, what a treasure is there for the woman who learns to appreciate him! Mr. Vavasour has *always* appreciated him, Kate. He *always* calls him 'the general,' you know."

"Yes," said Kate, perceiving a door of escape in this remark, and availing herself of it, "papa is so kind to boys! Do you know he has been to see poor little Tommy Miles two or three times a week ever since I have been away? There never was any one so kind as papa. His name ought to be sacred to every one here, I think. The idea of anybody insinuating scandal about him!"

"Yes, as you say, the idea of it! I am sure, if they were the last words I had to speak, I should maintain that that sweet Mrs. Fitzroy is not a designing woman, as people say."

"I wish people would mind their own business!"

"So do I, my love, I am sure! As I said to Capt. Boycott this morning, 'Kate, I know, will take the same view — the generous, unsuspicious view — of Mrs. Fitzroy's conduct, that I do.' We quite agreed about that."

"I do not see what there is to suspect."

"Oh! it has been *rumored*, my love, that she is going to *settle*

near you. I dare say it is false; but it has been said."

"And why should she not settle near us?"

"Oh! if *you* do not mind it, my love,—if you think it will conduce to your happiness."

"What nonsense! Mrs. Fitzroy is an old friend of papa's, and a most agreeable person. If she lives near here, I shall be very glad; but, as to its affecting my happiness either one way or another, it will not do that."

The next day it was Miss Tarragon who drove in a good deal harder the nail which Mrs. Lovenden had but gently tapped.

"I hear Mrs. Fitzroy did not take the cottage she went to see yesterday. Of course not! Nobody ever expected she would. Why *should* she? Bah!"

"No, indeed!" returned Kate, amused. "Why should she take a nasty place she does not like?"

"I wasn't thinking of the nastiness of the place. I meant that any one could see she had other *views*. She means to make *this* her home: that's the long and short of it."

"Does she? I'll tell her you say so."

"Humbug! You see her game as well as I do, Kate. I suppose you've made up your mind to your papa's marrying her, and so"—

"Papa's marrying Mrs. Fitzroy!"

"You don't mean to pretend you do not see that that is what she is driving at? She engrosses him completely, makes him avoid all his friends. And why? That nothing may interfere with her plots. It's as plain as a pikestaff. And your papa is just the sort of man she'll twist round her finger."

"You are quite mistaken," said Kate angrily; "and I must beg you will never again allude to this subject to me, Miss Tarragon, or speak of papa in such terms. It shows how little you really know him to speak of him so."

And, without listening to another word, Kate turned, and left her. The girl felt seriously annoyed; and the annoyance was one she could not dismiss from her thoughts. It was of no use to repeat to herself that it was "only Miss Tarragon's horrible gossip." The sting had left its poison. The girl's suspicions *were* aroused. But her clear judgment pointed to one course of action, which she pursued the same afternoon. She said to her father privately, "I want to give a croquet-party while Mrs. Fitzroy is here."

"Do as you like, Kate; but, if you mean to amuse *her*, I know she would be better pleased to be alone."

Kate hesitated for a moment.

"No, papa, it is not to please her. But people have got some silly ideas about her, in consequence of her avoiding them, or your doing so for her, and" —

"Confound their impudence! What do they say, Kate?"

"Oh! It is not so much what they *say*," replied Kate, — perhaps, for the first time in her life, avoiding the direct truth with her father, — "as the suspicion I see they entertain in their minds of a person whose conduct they consider as mysterious, and" —

"D—— their suspicions!" said Vavasour hotly; and his eyes flashed as he spoke. "Am I to be dictated to by a parcel of old women as to introducing them to my friends, and inviting them to my house? Upon my life, I believe they think they've a right to come here at all times, whether asked or not. I have a good mind to shut up the garden."

"I would not choose this moment to do it," replied Kate quietly. "And I think you will agree with me, papa, that if Mrs. Fitzroy remains here some time" —

"She certainly will remain here as long as she likes, and the longer, the better: I can promise them that."

"Then I think you will agree with me, papa, that she had better submit to be bored for an hour or two, and so prevent them from talking any more nonsense."

Her father fumed for a few minutes. But his anger was never long lived: he ended by telling Kate to do as she liked. And, having gained her point, she sent out invitations to the whole neighborhood, for some miles round, that same afternoon. The day she fixed on was the Thursday in the week following.

CHAPTER VIII.

VAVASOUR had written to his sister the same night that Kate had made her communication to her father. "Tell me all about this young fellow," he had said. "Above all, tell me if your impression is, that he really loves Kate. I care nothing for his poverty; but, if he is not likely to make her a good husband, I will quash the matter at once."

Lady Clive wrote in reply to this: —

"I will place the *pros* and the *cons* with regard to Mr. Douglas as fairly before you as a woman — who is always prejudiced — can. He is a perfect gentleman in principle and feeling, as well as in manner. He is more popular in his regiment than in society, where he is not very forthcoming. I am afraid he is seriously in love; though his conduct about Kate has been so strange, that I did not consider it necessary to tell you of an admiration that made no *ad-*

venge. At first I was uneasy: latterly, though I am sincerely sorry for the young man, I have felt relieved at seeing that his pride and delicacy of feeling have stood in the way of his prosecuting his suit. The fact is, — and here come the *cons*, — it is not only that Mr. Douglas is poor, but there is an unpleasant mystery about his birth. He is supposed to be the natural son of an old Mr. Douglas, who bought this young man's commission for him, and left him what little fortune he has. I am sure he feels the stain upon his birth keenly. Kate does not know this; and I have thought it unnecessary to tell her. She thinks he will pay you a visit before long, and make his proposals. I greatly doubt it. He feels, as I do, that his social position renders him an unfitting suitor for Kate. I hope you will hear no more about him, and that she will gradually forget this little episode."

So wrote a sensible and kindly woman of the world. Her brother received this letter on Sunday morning; but he said nothing to Kate about it. Time would show whether she or Lady Clive was right. As to the drawback which appeared insuperable to his sister, in Vavasour's eyes it was an offence that might be condoned, if the offender found favor with him. And the man of whose character Lady Clive could write as she

had done, he believed would find it.

Kate, in the mean time, was undisturbed by doubt or misgiving, and pursued the course she had laid down for herself as regarded their guest, without wavering. The ladies drove out daily together; and, whenever they met any of the neighbors, Kate pulled up her ponies, and duly presented Mrs. Fitzroy. That lady winced a little at first.

"Is it necessary, my dear?" she said.

"Yes," returned Kate, smiling. "You don't know what a small country neighborhood is. These good people live here from year's end to year's end. They consider it a right that they should know all the friends that stay with one; and they are mortally hurt if they are not introduced. Papa has already offended them: so you must let me repair the mischief. Besides, if you take a cottage here, you *must* know them."

"That is true," said Mrs. Fitzroy, and sighed. Then, having made up her mind that no escape was possible, she went through the ordeal with so good a grace, that Kate was delighted.

How she wished that she had never heard that idle gossip! Why could she not dismiss it from her mind, as she had dismissed a hundred other rumors from the village heretofore? She rated

herself soundly ; but, nevertheless, the uncomfortable impression remained, counteracting, in a great degree, the charm of her agreeable companion's society.

"How devoted your father is to you!" said Mrs. Fitzroy to her one day.

"He has no one but me to care for in the world, you see," replied Kate, without thinking.

"How very lonely he will be when you marry!"

Kate said nothing, but flicked her ponies.

"Do you remember your mother, Kate?" asked Mrs. Fitzroy in a low voice, after a time.

"No: I was only three when she died."

"Who supplied her place to you, dear?"

"I was sent home to my aunt, Lady Clive, and was educated by her."

Another pause.

"Do you know, Kate, that, had things been different years ago, you might have been my daughter? Your father and I were engaged once. You would probably not be as nice as you now are; but do you think you could have loved me as your mother?"

Kate looked up into her companion's face quickly. She felt the color come into her own cheek, and scarcely knew what to reply.

"Had you been my mother," she said at last, "I have no doubt

I should have loved you. I cannot fancy not loving one's mother."

Mrs. Fitzroy turned away her face, and said no more. But her eyes were filled with tears when Kate looked at them a few minutes later; and she remembered her father had told her that Mrs. Fitzroy had had children, and lost them. The girl's warm heart went out more unreservedly to the lonely woman than it had yet done. If she could only forget all those suggestions of a possible marriage with her father, she would embrace the poor childless mother. But Mrs. Fitzroy's words had forced those suggestions back upon her: there was no escape from them.

What then? Let her look the matter boldly in the face. When she and Christian Douglas were married, — and Kate's sanguine nature led her to believe that the marriage would be settled before another week was past, — it was idle to pretend to think that she could continue to live with her father. Her future husband was a soldier by choice; and Kate, like her father, would have scorned the man who threw up his profession at four and twenty to lead a life of inglorious sloth upon his wife's fortune. No: she must follow him wherever he might be sent, — to India or the Colonies. She had made her election; and she was not one to waver or turn

back. If this man truly loved her, as she believed, she must renounce her father and her home, for his sake. At best, her visits to Laurel Bank would be rare: at worst, it might be years before she returned to Europe. Tenderly attached to her father as she was, this would be a very sore trial; but there was no middle course possible. Ought she not to desire that he should feel the separation as little as possible? that his loneliness should be comforted by a companion? that his declining years should be watched and cared for by one whose duty, as well as privilege, it should be never to leave him? Love without leaven of selfishness or jealousy is rare; and Kate's affections were not perfectly schooled. We have her own testimony that her heart was bestowed before such direct avowal had been made her as would have justified the bestowal in the eyes of prudence. Where she loved, it was with all her heart and all her strength; and, generous as her nature was, I must admit that it was not without a hard struggle that she could entertain the idea of her place beside her father being filled by another; of a stranger coming in between them, and being henceforward, by right, no less than by choice, his first consideration. That she brought herself to discuss, and at last to admit, the advisability, for his sake, of

such an usurpation, showed the girl's fine nature better than an apathetic abandonment of her rights would have done.

She was compelled to own, that no woman she had ever seen appeared so suited to her father as Mrs. Fitzroy. They had loved each other in early youth; and Kate could not doubt that he retained a true and tender regard for his first love. He could not bear leaving home; and here was a woman, who, in spite of her grace and fascination, was contented to sit down in a chimney-corner for the remainder of her life. Kate became more critical than she had ever been before: she watched Mrs. Fitzroy's every look and action: she pondered over every chance word that might indicate character. It all fitted in: there was nothing that jarred the harmonious whole. And, as the days rolled by, Kate, observing her father also narrowly, believed that obstruction on her part would be unjustifiable, if it were not useless as well.

What forced this last consideration upon her was a little scene to which she was witness one night. Kate had not her father's passion for music. She liked English songs, of which she could comprehend the words. She cared little for Italian; and she frankly confessed that classical instrumental music bored her greatly. But

Vavasour delighted in hearing Mrs. Fitzroy play bits of Beethoven and Mozart; and each evening, when she moved to the piano, it had come to be an understood thing that certain favorite "movements" of his should open the programme. Kate sat patiently, wishing that she could find more pleasure in it; wishing, for her father's sake, that she possessed this gift of fingers (for such it seemed to her, and nothing more), and wondering a good deal what it all *meant*, — whether, indeed, the composer had a distinct meaning to convey. Kate's mind was of that order for which the vague and impalpable has no charm. She honestly loved some poetry; but it was the vigorous, healthy poetry she could understand, not the melodious jingle, in which sense is subservient to sound. Now, this habit of always demanding a meaning is fatal to the enjoyment of music.

On the night in question, — it was the Monday night, and the harvest-moon was now nearly at the full, — Kate was standing at the conservatory-door, looking out on the moonlit garden, and inhaling the sweet dewy breath of the flowers in the still night-air, when Mrs. Fitzroy began playing a fugue of Bach's. How those passages ran after each other, and seemed to trip each other's heels up! What an absence of melody!

What an inextricable jumble of sound it appeared to Kate! To her thinking, it was peculiarly dissonant with the scene before her; and she noiselessly stepped out on the terrace, and stole away. I fear this escape was not altogether unpremeditated; for she held some apples in her hand, which she had taken at dessert; and her steps were now bent directly to the stables. Opening the door of the loose box in which her favorite horse stood, with sensitive nostril sniffing his mistress's approach, ears pricked, and eyes expectant, she let in a flood of moonlight which shimmered upon his chestnut flanks, and turned the yellow straw into gold. The horse neighed his welcome.

"My beauty, my dear old fellow!" said the girl, with one arm round her favorite's neck, while in the most gentlemanlike manner he took the apple from her other hand with his soft lips. "Your neigh is more musical in my ears than all the Bach's fugues in the world. That is what I call *real* melody, Beauty. I wonder whether you think *my* voice so. At all events, no one else does, I'm afraid. Who will bring you apples when I'm gone? Will *she*, I wonder? But unless I'm 'sent across the seas to await her Majesty's pleasure,' as they say of convicts, Beauty and I will remain together, dear — won't we? — till death do us part."

The sound of the old coachman's and groom's voices, as they approached leisurely across the yard, and entered the saddle-room adjoining the loose box, met Kate's ear. She was administering her last apple when she caught the following words —

"I'll bet ye five bob, Mr. James, as she'll be missus here afore three months is past."

"Well, she's a handsome lady. I don't know as I ever seed a finer, nor a nicer spoken. But, for all that, I don't want the young missus's nose to be put out o' joint; and *if* there was a fam'ly, ye see, George, it'd be share and share alike, I s'pose."

The blood rushed to Kate's face. The idea had never crossed her mind. But, if she tried to influence her father against marrying Mrs. Fitzroy, would not every one think, might not even *he* be brought to suspect, that she was moved by some mercenary consideration of this kind? No! Her dear father, at least, would never believe this; though, to the vulgar mind, it would be the gravamen of her trial. The servants already talked of it: it had come to that!

She was sitting on a bench in the garden now, her heart still in a tumult of perplexity and indignation. The fugue had ceased. Now and again a hand was passed over the keys, and a long ripple of

notes broke upon the silence, which was responded to by the distant bark of a dog; then, again, all was still. The clematis shook its fragrance over her from the wall above: at her feet the heavy-headed carnations glowed motionless in the moonlight. All seemed at peace, save her own heart; and there the struggle that had been going on for days had reached its crisis in this courageous endeavor to see what was for her father's happiness, and to act accordingly, no matter at what sacrifice to herself.

"Oft in the stilly night,
Ere slumber's chain hath bound me,
Fond memory brings the light
Of other days around me,"

the sweet voice began at last. Kate loved the old melody. She rose, and drew near the window. The lamps had been sent away, as they only attracted the moths. The window was open; and the corner of the room where the singer sat was flooded with moonlight. It turned the long taper fingers into ivory scarcely less pure than the keys over which they moved: it seemed to make an aureola round that beautiful head, across the features of which an expression of infinite sadness now played; and it lighted the profile of the man who leaned on the piano, facing her, his dark eyes immovably fixed on the countenance before him.

The song is ended.

"Ah," says Vavasour, drawing a deep breath, "how often in India, 'ere slumber's chain had bound me,' I lay at night, and thought of that song! You sang it the very last evening we were together. Do you remember?"

"I had rather not recall that time, my friend. It is only painful."

"It was the happiest in my life," says Vavasour quickly.

"All my after-sorrows were the consequence and punishment of my weakness then."

Mrs. Fitzroy utters these words in a low voice. "I cannot bear to think of it. You, whose life has gone smoothly, who are not utterly lonely, as I am, — you, William, with a dear child at your side to love and reverence you, in whom all your hopes centre" [here the low voice trembled], — "*you*, thank God! have never suffered, *can* never suffer, as I have."

"My married life was not" — begins Vavasour impetuously; then he checks himself. "Well, she is gone. I'll say nothing of her. She might have been different with another sort of man. But we weren't suited: that's certain. I dare say it was all for the best."

"I am sure you have nothing to reproach yourself with; and you have your reward now for past trial in Kate, who is" —

The girl heard no more. She turned swiftly across the lawn to a seat, where she only caught the distant murmur of the voices through the window. Not until her name was mentioned, did it occur to her that the speakers had forgotten her probable vicinity. But she could not regret that she had heard those few words. They seemed to make her path more clear to her. She knew now, for the first time, that the mother whom she could not remember, and had rarely heard mentioned, had never been a "helpmeet" to her father; that he had only known happiness within these last few years, when Kate had been all in all to him. If she left him now, was it not a duty to do all in her power that the void might be filled? And how could it be filled so fitly as by the early love which it was clear the man's true heart had never forgotten?

CHAPTER IX.

A BAZAAR in aid of the local charities was held at Barfield on the following day. Kate had been begged to hold a stall, in concert with some matron of importance, but had declined. She felt herself, however, doubly bound to go there as a visitor; and, in spite of all Mrs. Fitzroy's supplications to be excused, she insisted on that lady's accompanying her.

"We need not stay ten minutes, you know."

"But what is the use of my going? I have no money to throw away."

"I mean to lay out ten pounds, that is, a pound a minute; which I am sure will be handsome for us both."

"Why not get your papa to go, and leave me quietly at home?"

"Because papa *won't*. He does nearly all that I ask him; but a bazaar is one of the things I never can induce him to go to. You won't be so cruel as to make me go with Mrs. Loveden? You know I can't go alone."

Then Mrs. Fitzroy submitted, with a sigh, to the inevitable.

At Barfield there is a military detachment of one company from the garrison-town twenty miles distant. The detachment had procured the services of its regimental band in aid of the good work; and this was the liveliest feature in the day's proceedings, which were as monotonously irritating as fancy fairs usually are; standing in about the same relation to a good business-bazaar, that an amateur opera does to the genuine article at Covent Garden.

Of course, all Millwood was there; every wagonette, one-horse chaise, and even donkey-chair, having been pressed into the service of the ladies. Wondrous was

the attire of some of our acquaintance; the appearance of Miss Tarragon, indeed, causing quite a commotion in the room. Her garment in hue was green, perhaps a thought bright; but Petrarch does not state the exact shade of Laura's robe. Who knows? It may not have been less vivid than Miss Tarragon's. It was the singular fashion in which her gown was caught up behind, to a height which made her resemble a Boulogne fish-wife in search of crabs on the sands, which excited the mirth of those who were unaccustomed to Miss Tarragon's appearance. But, as she sensibly remarked, the great thing was to keep your feet free in a crowd, and your gown out of the dust. For the crowd was great; but it prevailed nothing against Miss Tarragon. Mrs. Crowe observed of her friend, that she was like a two-pronged steel fork stuck firmly into the ground. She was vigorous in voice upon this occasion, and drastic in her measures for the enforcement of benevolence upon the unready. As Mrs. Crowe said, "Eliza is the sort of woman whom the man in the parable would have sent out to *compel* the people to come to his marriage-feast."

She stood at the door with a hideous cushion, for which she was collecting tickets for a raffle; and she swooped down upon each new arrival, and never relaxed her

talons till she had wrung the half-crown from her victim.

Here, too, a little farther on, was Mrs. Loveden, in an attitude of almost tearful supplication, holding a photograph-book in her hand, for which she was humbly but vainly endeavoring to find twenty subscribers at a shilling each. She met with an inexorable refusal from most of those who were still bleeding from Miss Tarragon,—an epitome of the world's conduct every day, which succumbs to force, and is offended at feebleness. Mrs. Loveden wore a muslin, over which a small flower had originally meandered; but the tortuous stems which supported these blossoms had, in successive "washes" disappeared, leaving the ground faintly speckled, as it were, by a colony of pale fleas. A red Indian scarf embroidered in many colors—"a relic of her affluent days," as she told us all—was, we need hardly say, always slipping from her shoulders, and getting round people's legs; and the number of times her handkerchief and gloves were picked up by strangers, and presented to her, was not to be counted.

"Why don't you put your gloves on your hands, and keep them there, and stuff your handkerchief into your pocket?" said Miss Tarragon indignantly, when, for the second time, the "flotsam and jetsam" of Mrs. Loveden's

frail bark were swept by the great human wave under the spinster's feet. But this was just what poor Mrs. Loveden could never do.

Capt. Boycott was invaluable. So few men would make themselves really useful! but here was one, who, being large and strong, could convoy young ladies through the crowd, and accosted every one, and fetched cups of tea, and called carriages, and held the box from which all the lotteries were drawn.

Mrs. Crowe presided over a cohort of young ladies at the tea-stall. She had at first declined this post, thinking she would have fewer opportunities for turning her friends into ridicule than by mixing in the crowd; but then she could hardly do this without spending *some* money: whereas to sit at the receipt of custom for tea and cakes which you have not provided is a cheap and effective act of benevolence. So she decided in favor of the latter course.

Alcibiades was in attendance at this table, carrying about cups of tea, which were always half spilt before they reached their destination. Mrs. Loveden had wished her son to wear his uniform. It was only when Capt. Boycott represented to her that even the three officers quartered at Barfield would not appear in regimentals, that she was induced to abandon the idea, consoled by the reflection that there was Kate's croquet-

party two days later, which being "at home," so to speak, there *could* be no impropriety in the dear boy's dazzling them all by his scarlet and gold on *that* occasion, just for once and away.

It is four o'clock, and the din is at its height in the town hall. All the great county families have arrived: there is a circle of footmen worthy of a London concert round the door. The band is "tu-tuing" its loudest in the gallery: sirens are luring men to their destruction down below. The more modest of these mermaids remain in their caves, and only angle with their smiles, and other tempting bait, for the loose fish who swim past. The boldest pursue their prey, hang on to them, will take no denial: "Only seven and sixpence for this card-case. My *own* work. You can't refuse me!" "This smoking-cap, — only two pounds! The very thing to suit your complexion. Well, if you won't buy it, will you help me to get up a lottery for it? Five shilling tickets — you'll take one yourself, of course?"

Into this Babel, Kate, accompanied by Mrs. Fitzroy, who is dressed so as to attract as little attention as possible, but whose height and beauty render it impossible for her to pass unobserved, enter, and make their way up the room. Kate has taken two tickets of Miss Tarragon, and has moved

on. She is now opposite Mrs. Loveden, whose face and ringlets are in a state of active exudation from the heat, and whose voice is really piteous as she cries, —

"Oh, my dear, dear Kate! I am so thankful you are come! You'll help me, I'm sure, my dear — and you, Mrs. Fitzroy. Oh, how cool you both look! I'm ready to drop with the heat, and with this horrid book; and *no one* will buy a ticket! and I can't get a cup of tea. I shall faint, I *know*, if I don't get some. Have you seen Alcibiades? If I could only find him, he would get me some; but I can't leave this spot. My only chance of selling tickets is to stay here. Oh, dear! I am so hot! Where's my handkerchief? I must have dropped it. How odd! Oh! don't give yourself the trouble. Thank you, my love, thank you! And where can my gloves be gone? Oh! here they are under your feet: so sorry! Positively, I declare, there's Miss Tarragon has sold her last ticket. Why, why, should every one buy her tickets, and no one buy mine? Is it not hard, my love? What! take them all? Do you mean that *you* will actually buy them *all*? Oh, you dear, dear" —

She was about to fall on Kate's neck; but the latter vigorously staved her off.

"Oh, there's Capt. Boycott!"

cried Mrs. Loveden, and made a frantic clutch at his arm. "*Do* get me a cup of tea! there's a dear, good man!"

"But, my dear Mrs. Loveden, it is impossible to carry a cup through this crowd. The tea-stall is quite at the other end. I'll take you there."

"Tea?" exclaimed Miss Tarragon, who bore down upon the captain at this moment. "Who wants tea at this hour?—much too early. You make your inside, like a washer-woman's fingers, Mrs. Loveden, with all the hot water you swallow.—Capt. Boycott, I want my lottery drawn now. You must go round and get the ticket-holders."

"But I *do* want some tea so badly," pleaded Mrs. Loveden; "and I don't know where to go, or how to get there."

"Nonsense! Walk down the room: you have legs, I suppose, as I have."

"Oh, dear, I'm so hot and so nervous! I wish Alcibiades were here. There, I have lost my gloves again!"

"I tell you what, you will lose your bonnet, if you don't take care. It's hanging on the back of your neck. Why don't you drive a pin into your head, as I do?"

Kate, who had been making some purchases at a neighboring stall, here came to the poor dissolving lady's help, and, seeing

that the captain was reft from her, offered to convey her to the tea-stall. But the captain could not let Miss Vavasour go without a little flourishing compliment.

"You and your friend, Miss Kate, are the observed of all observers, quite the rose and the rosebud!"

"Oh! I'm only a bramble," laughed Kate; "and I wish I was in my hedge at this moment. Brambles ought not to come into crowds.—Put your arm in mine, Mrs. Loveden, and we will try and get to the tea.—Will you follow us close, Mrs. Fitzroy?"

But, as she looked at that lady, she observed that Mrs. Fitzroy suddenly started. The next moment she whispered in Kate's ear,—

"Do not mind me; but I cannot stand this heat, and must get into the air. Say nothing. I shall slip out quietly: you will find me in the carriage when you come out. I had rather go alone: so *please*, dear, say nothing."

Kate nodded her assent. She saw that her guest's indisposition was more nervous than physical, and that the kindest act was silently to obey her wish.

A minute later, Capt. Boycott and Miss Tarragon were arrested by a tall man, whose manner was marked by an inquisitive condescension. A friend, evidently a foreigner, was with him.

The tall man took off his hat to the spinster, but did not address her. He laid his hand on the captain's arm, and said;—

"How do, Boycott? Who's the lady with Miss Vavasour,—the one you spoke to just now?"

"Ha, ah!" laughs the captain slyly. "I know you've an eye for beauty, Lord Henry. Prodigious fine woman, ain't she? She is a Mrs. Fitzroy."

"You *are* right, then," cries the tall man, addressing his companion. "By Jove! how extraordinary!" Then, turning again to the captain, "How on earth did Miss Vavasour come to know her?"

"She is an old friend of Vavasour's;" then, in a loud whisper, "Nothing wrong, I hope, eh?"

Lord Henry stoops, and says something in the captain's ear. "Don't mention it, Boycott: I don't want to make mischief. It's no business of mine, you know: only it's a pity, such a nice girl as that."

"What's a pity?" demands Miss Tarragon fiercely; for she can stand it no longer. Lord Henry once spoke to her, some years ago, and ever since has confined himself to a distant, supercilious bow upon the rare occasions when they meet. But to this she is supremely indifferent. She is no tuft-hunter, whatever else she may be. She simply regards Lord Henry as an idiot, who

does not recognize superior merit when he finds it; and she is not to be deterred by such purely personal considerations from slaking her thirst for information.

So she demands boldly, "*What's a pity?*"

"Oh, nothing!" returns his lordship, recoiling from the attack.

"Why don't you say *out* what you've got to say? I always do. What is the use of this whispering, Lord Henry?"

"I whisper," says Lord Henry, looking at her full in the face, "when I do not wish to be overheard. I am afraid of alarming you, Miss Tarragon."

"Alarming me! Nonsense! Something about that Mrs. Fitzroy, eh? I was sure of it."

"You have guessed it, Miss Tarragon. I remarked to Capt. Boycott that it was a pity Miss Vavasour should be with her, as Mrs. Fitzroy is only just recovered from scarlet-fever."

"Pshaw! I don't believe a word of it," cries Miss Tarragon, as Lord Henry, with scarcely repressed laughter, moves on, while the captain, like a huge eel, slips from her grasp, ostensibly to collect the ticket-holders for the raffle. Do not think to escape, most amiable of human sieves! Miss Tarragon can bide her time. She will shake the truth out of you sooner or later.

As Kate struggled with Mrs.

Loveden through the crowd, she found herself pressed close to the stall of a great lady, the sister-in-law of the Lord Henry we have just met. Kate had her own reasons for not coming more into contact than needful with these people; and she would not have stopped now, had not the lady called out, —

"Miss Vavasour, pray stop a moment: I want to speak to you. First, though, can't I tempt you with these hunting-sketches done by my brother Henry?"

"No, thank you," replied Kate decidedly.

"Nor this little '*coin de feu*' of my own work? The pattern came from Paris. Only four pounds."

Kate did not particularly admire it; but she was impelled by ignoble motives to say, "Very well, I will take it."

She was anxious to get away before Lord Henry should come up. She was envying Mrs. Fitzroy, and counting the minutes till she could join her; and she must leave the room with a clear conscience, and an empty purse; all of which reasons, in solution, prompted her to lay down four of her remaining six sovereigns in return for the embroidered garment, which, being of Parisian design and patrician execution, could not but be cheap at the money.

While the great lady, with her

own delicate fingers, leisurely folded Miss Vavasour's purchase in paper, she leaned forward, and said in a low, impressive voice, that was meant to convey the interest and protection vouchsafed to one who needed them by a superior order of being, —

"Pardon me, my dear Miss Vavasour, as you have no mother, if I say, that, from what I have been told of her, you ought not to be seen with the person who came into this room with you. You cannot know what is said of her, I am sure, or" —

"Thank you, I know all the Millwood gossip. I am sorry you should think it worth notice."

"This is not Millwood gossip, Miss Vavasour," said the lady, shaking her head more in sorrow than in wrath. "It comes from a friend of ours, an Italian, who is staying with us, and who knew this Mrs. Fitzroy in Florence, where, he says, no one visited her."

"Then he ought to be ashamed of himself," returned Kate indignantly. "No Englishman, I hope, would have so little chivalry as to malign a defenceless woman. Mrs. Fitzroy has had a life of sorrow and trial, which is quite sufficient reason for her avoiding the world."

"I am sorry you take that tone, Miss Vavasour," said the lady more coldly. "Our friend is the

last person in the world *to malign* any one, as you call it; and I warned you for your own good, as being seen with a person of that sort is likely to damage you; and having no mother" —

"But I have a father, who is quite able to take care of me. I am sure your motives are excellent, and I am much obliged to you; but I never listen to scandal, and I never give up a friend. Is my parcel ready? Thank you: good-morning."

And, without waiting for a rejoinder, she turned away. Mrs. Loveden had not heard a word of what had passed. She only observed that Kate's eye sparkled, and her cheek was flushed. As they neared the tea-stall, Alcibiades charged the crowd like a bull, with his head lowered, his arms, like horns, being extended, and culminating in a teacup, and plate of biscuits.

"Look at him! Here he is! Here is dear Alcibiades! *Now* we are all right. Now I am sure you will feel *quite* safe, my dear Kate," says the young man's fond parent, "with the arm of my stalwart young warrior to protect us."

"Both his arms are fully employed," laughs Kate; "and I assure you I feel quite safe, only hot and irritable.—Take care, Alcibiades, or you will have that tea all over me, and I shall never forgive you."

She spoke not a moment too soon. There were breakers dashing over those China cliffs above her head (the "storm in a teacup" being actually realized for once); and, as the youth moved his arm from Kate's vicinity, a sudden jerk it received sent the contents of the cup down Mrs. Loveden's back.

The poor lady uttered an hysterical cry, and melted into tears. Alcibiades stood with his mouth open, speechless and helpless. Kate was for carrying her off to the cloak-room to be dried; but the object of her solicitude resisted this, gasping, between her sobs, —

"N—no! N—no! Only give me some tea!"

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Crowe. "Hasn't she had enough?"

"You had better take off your scarf: it is dripping," said Kate. And, whipping out her new purchase, she added, "Put on this jacket. I present it to you in compensation of Alcibiades' awkwardness; for, if I hadn't spoken, it would have been over *me*."

Mrs. Loveden was for weeping afresh, — partly at Kate's unreflecting use of the word "awkwardness," partly over the cream-stained relic of her affluent days, partly at her sweet Kate's kindness.

But Kate was not disposed to be wept over. She had done all

that was needful, and now made the best of her way out of the hall, only stopping for a moment to give Capt. Boycott her remaining money to invest in what lotteries he chose.

She stepped into the open air, and breathed freely once more. She regretted that she had ever entered that horrid place. She shook the dust from off her feet; but the invisible dust that gathers from contact with evil, upon the fine machinery of thought, is not so easily to be swept away.

CHAPTER X.

BOTH ladies were very silent during their drive home. Into the condition of Mrs. Fitzroy's mind it does not concern us to inquire at this moment: it is enough to state that she made no effort to conceal that she felt depressed, and disinclined for any sustained conversation. Kate was only too ready to fall in with the humor of her companion. When Mrs. Fitzroy had left the hall so suddenly, Kate had felt persuaded that it was not on account of the heat, but because some sad reminiscence had been accidentally stirred, and that her companion, long unused to crowds, could not stand the strain put upon her.

The rumors she had heard, without Kate's harboring the suspicion they were meant to excite,

tended to confirm this theory, and to account for Mrs. Fitzroy's taciturnity. There was no doubt but that the person who had recognized her she had also seen. He was associated in her mind with the bitter past; perhaps with her husband, or, it might be, with her dead children. Kate was too loyal to believe evil of the woman she really liked, and was trying hard to love. To sit beside her there, entertaining a doubt about her companion, would have been impossible to Kate. She would have turned round, and asked her openly to explain the origin of these malevolent reports, had she not felt confident that they were baseless. Young as she was, it had been her fate, unfortunately, to hear a great deal of gossip; and experience had taught her that not one scandalous story in fifty had any foundation in truth. Therefore she dismissed this now from her mind as unworthy a moment's thought; and, as to telling her father what she had heard, she would have scouted the idea.

Then her thoughts flew to Christian Douglas. Hitherto I have said but little of her feelings towards the young soldier, leaving her to express them in her own words to her father. Absolute confidence in all she loved was the keynote of Kate's character. The refrain of Enid's song, "Trust me not at all, or trust me all in

all," might have been her motto. It indicated her natural standpoint in every relation of life, arising from a condition of sentiment she could no more have modified than she could have changed the color of her eyes. She was no gushing, enthusiastic girl; she did not lightly bestow her affections, or even her friendships; and she was richly endowed with that most uncommon possession, common sense.

If I insist on these points, it is because I believe, that while they apparently render it more difficult to understand Kate's absolute surrender of her heart to a man she had known but a few weeks, and who had as yet never openly spoken of his love, they in reality explain it. Without affirming that Kate had any wonderful insight into human character, she had strong instincts; and they had led her from the very first to regard with favor the young soldier of few words, whose admiration was wrung from him, as it were; who, if he worshipped,—and it was pretty evident to all that he did so,—worshipped silently, protesting only with his eyes, which never left her when he had quitted her side to make way for more demonstrative admirers. Had Kate been a coquette, it might have been thought that such conduct piqued her. The truth is, it interested her, as

being unlike that of any young man she had hitherto known. She was not at all averse to admiration; but she valued it at its proper worth. She was well aware how much of the incense which Lord Henry and others laid at her feet was due to the fact of her being heiress to three or four thousand a year. Had innocence of the world's ways, or a colossal vanity, blinded her on this point, Mrs. Crowe and others would assuredly have opened her eyes. Therefore, the aspect in which Christian Douglas presented himself, from a very early period in their acquaintance, was singularly calculated to impress Kate. Here was a stalwart young fellow, the life and soul of his regiment, the favorite of all, hitherto heart-whole, if report spoke truly. This frank, chivalrous young Englishman showed unmistakably that he was at last smitten. He was no flirt. If he did not talk to Kate, he talked to none else; and he only went to places where she was to be found. And yet Christian Douglas, who was said to be not overburdened with this world's goods, far from avowing his love for the heiress, obviously shrank from doing so. She explained it all to her own satisfaction, as we know. Those last words of his, asking permission to pay a running visit to Laurel Bank in the course of a few days, had fortified her

hope, and cleared away all doubt that pride would prevent his speaking.

Whether Douglas had mentioned having to be in London in the middle of the week, I know not; but, for some reason or other, the impression on Kate's mind was, that he would not appear at Laurel Bank before Friday or Saturday. She had for that reason fixed the croquet-party for Thursday. She arranged in her imagination now, as she drove along, all that would pass between him and her father. She seemed to hear the simple, straightforward words in which Christian Douglas would tell of his love and his poverty, and plead for time to enable him to distinguish himself, and rise in his profession, should Mr. Vavasour refuse to give his daughter to a poor subaltern. And she knew the half-cordial, half-irritable manner in which her dear father would at first respond, until wholly won by the young soldier's manly frankness.

How strange that poor human nature should persist in such delusion, when the substance of things present so rarely resembles in the least the shadows we have forecast of them!

The day following was a very quiet one at Laurel Bank, and one of much agitated cackle, and waddling to and fro, among the geese upon the village green.

First, the weak, good-natured captain had been caught and pinned by Miss Tarragon, while smoking his pipe upon his doorstep. She had not left him till every word of the gossip which Lord Henry had whispered had been wrung from the captain's unwilling lips. He dreaded Miss Tarragon's virulence. He would, probably, in due course of time, have yielded to temptation, and breathed the scandal into the affrighted ear of the sentimental Mrs. Loveden, or slyly chuckled over it with the lively Mrs. Crowe; but, though gossip was his meat and drink, he had no mind to make mischief, being really kindly natured; and the spinster's loud-voiced diatribes always alarmed the good captain. He had no choice, however, but to "stand and deliver" before this social highway-woman.

And, lo! before Miss Tarragon has left him, up comes Mrs. Loveden, who, having observed them from her window, runs over, "with just my shawl, you know, quite by chance, to Mrs. Jennings's, for a skein of worsted." Neither of her friends is deceived by this fiction; and Miss Tarragon reproves her sternly for coming out without her bonnet, which, in a woman of her time of life, is neither morally befitting, nor physically prudent. But the spinster is too eager to tell and to dis-

cuss the news she has heard to waste many words on Mrs. Loveden. Then, in due course of time, all three go over to the admiral's.

That afternoon, a solemn conclave was held. What was to be done? It was too, too dreadful to contemplate what would probably befall their respected and immaculate community, were no steps taken to avert the evil. This viper who had nestled herself among their flowers of innocence, this "scarlet lady of Babylon," as the admiral styled her, would, unquestionably, become the mistress of Laurel Bank, the leading lady of their immediate neighborhood. Either they must consent to contamination, and visit her, or give up the delights of Laurel Bank, its gardens, its little dinners, its social advantages of many kinds.

"Oh! if this should, indeed, turn out to be true," wailed Mrs. Loveden. "Poor Kate!"

"I can't pity her," said Miss Tarragon; "for I warned her about this person, and she was very hoity-toity to me. I saw from the very first what Mrs. Fitzroy was; though *you*, Mrs. Loveden, chose to take the *good-natured* view of her conduct. It is so easy to be good natured! Of course, her avoidance of us all *now* is easily explained. Somebody must speak to Mr. Vavasour. I think you, admiral, *ought*."

"*I?*" cried the veteran angrily. "Why should *I* speak? It is no business of mine. *I* have no wife nor daughter. It is purely a ladies' question, ma'am."

"Then you, Capt. Boycott," said Miss Tarragon, whisking round suddenly upon him: "it is your duty to prevent this; for you *may* have a wife some day, though you haven't now,—and think of the contamination!"

The captain looked scared and sheepish. "'Pon my soul, I'm not a marrying man; and I wouldn't speak to Vavasour for any thing. He's not a chap you *can* speak to like that, you see, though he's such a good fellow."

"Good fellow, indeed!" snorted Miss Tarragon, "foisting an infamous character upon us. I declare, men are greater cowards than women. *You'll* speak then, Eliza,—you, as a married woman, who feel that this creature ought and must be turned out of society?"

"On the contrary, I am all for keeping her in," said Mrs. Crowe. "It will be such a thing to have one open and decided sinner among us, whom we can all throw stones at. Our virtues and our petty vices are becoming so monotonous!"

Miss Tarragon lastly turned with withering scorn to Mrs. Loveden.

"It is no use appealing to *you*, Mrs. Loveden. I shall have to

undertake the task of appealing to Kate myself. As an unmarried woman, I cannot discuss the subject with Mr. Vavasour, I suppose ;" (oh, boasted valor !) " but I am resolved that the matter shall not rest here. I'll go up this very afternoon."

But she was doomed to disappointment. Miss Vavasour was "out;" and, though her visitor stalked about the gardens for nearly two hours, her patience was not rewarded. Kate, from her boudoir-window up stairs, watched her, and did not descend till the church clock had struck six, and summoned Miss Tarragon to her dinner.

CHAPTER XI.

THERE was a heavy storm that night ; and it was feared that the fine weather, which had been uninterrupted for an unusual time, was now broken, and that Kate's party would be ruined. But the rain, which fell for some hours, did no more than refresh the parched ground ; and the lightened clouds were seen scudding away before a north-east wind an hour after sunrise. Then the mist that lay on the hot earth was gradually lifted ; the birds, with a prophetic instinct as to the pale lemon-colored sky, sang among the dripping boughs, as if intoxicated ; and Nature set to work to repair

the temporary mischief that her children had suffered in the night. Where the stem was broken, she pushed forth a fresh shoot : where the blossom was snapped off, a baby bud was born. What the garden lost in brilliant efflorescence, it gained in freshness of verdure. The grass, which had grown hard and brown, once more felt elastic under the feet. The dusty laurels near the roads were washed pure green. By ten o'clock, even the admiral's lugubrious croakings were silenced. There was no doubt about it, that the day — which was to prove the most eventful one in the lives of most of those in whose fate we are concerned — would be glorious. The marquee could be erected without fear of its serving as a refuge from showers ; and the cook consolidated her Mont Blanc of ice in the comfortable assurance that there would be a grateful assemblage to prize and praise it.

At mid-day the captain was, as usual, at the station when the train arrived. A young man jumped from the first-class carriage, and claimed a gun-case, a hat-box, and well-worn portmanteau, on which was painted in white letters, —

LIEUT. C. DOUGLAS,
—th Light Infantry.

He was rather above the middle height, and slight. Critically ex-

amined, his figure was decidedly his best point; for the countenance, though attractive, was not absolutely handsome. He looked like what he was, — a gentleman and an English soldier, to the very heart's core. It may seem absurd to say that his carriage could hardly have belonged to a foreigner; but those who observe closely will understand what is meant by the strengthful ease which characterizes the firmly-knit frame of a young Englishman bred to athletic exercises. It is as tempered steel compared with cast iron. Look at the rigid Prussian officer, whose muscular power is shown by the weight he can lift; at that wiry and uneasy Frenchman, so dexterous in the use of the foil. Though both are as strong as this Douglas, neither possesses the same careless grace and elasticity of limb, which perhaps, after all, is as much a result of a particular training of the mind as of the body.

As Kate had flatteringly observed, this young man's eyes resembled her old dog "Lion's," in their fire and faithful directness. You never detected a shifty or uncertain glance; and as, in looking at "Lion," you felt that he must be far above stealing a bone, so, when your eye met Douglas's, you would have put your hand into the fire upon his incapacity to commit an underhand or treacherous deed. The eyes had this,

also, in common with the old Newfoundland's, — that their expression was one of a reserved melancholy; of which, in the dog's case, science has never yet detected the cause, but which, in biped and quadruped alike, strange to say, is not found to be inconsistent with a high spirit and fiery energy when roused.

His hair was cropped, soldier-like, which is the next remove from convict-like; and his smooth brown face was unadorned, save by a very small light mustache, which did not conceal a large, firm-set mouth. Without being actually shy, his manners were too retiring for him to be very popular out of his regiment, where he was a universal favorite. Some persons, indeed, had so little discrimination as to fancy that he gave himself airs; but as he was poor, and of no particular birth, this view was not tenable: and society in general troubled itself very little about him, until roused to a critical observation of his conduct towards Miss Vavasour. He was certainly a very odd young man. There was this pretty heiress smiling frankly upon him, and he did not seem to be able to make up his mind to propose. For a man whose chief distinction was, that he was said to be the best runner in the British army, such behavior was inexplicable.

"Take care of these things," said he to the railway porter. "I shall be here in time for the five o'clock train to the north. How far is it to Mr. Vavasour's house?"

The captain was listening, and replied, with alacrity, —

"Laurel Bank? My friend Vavasour's? Oh! less than a mile. I'll show you the way. Nice place, deused nice place, Laurel Bank! Party there this afternoon, — all the neighborhood. Come here for it, I suppose?"

"No," said Douglas. "I am not." He looked, as he felt, annoyed. His visit was unfortunately timed. How could he hope for a long private interview with Kate's father, if the place was full of visitors? "At what hour will people arrive?" he asked, after a few moments' hesitation.

"I suppose about four."

Douglas looked at his watch: it wanted twenty minutes of one. The porter at the same instant came up.

"Miss Vavasour's pony-carriage is druv' over to fetch some parcels, sir, if you like to go back in it."

As time seemed precious to the young man, he availed himself of the proposal, greatly to the captain's chagrin, who lost a companion in his walk, and the opportunity of learning who he was, where he came from, and what

brought him here. He examined each parcel as it was handed into the carriage. "Ah, sponge-cakes from Whisk's at Barfield! What's this? Fruits from Covent Garden, by Jove! They ought to have enough at Laurel Bank. Well, good-day, sir, we shall meet, no doubt, at my friend Vavasour's, by and by?"

Douglas stepped into the pony-carriage, and wished him good-morning with a smile, but left the implied interrogatory unanswered. He sat silent and abstracted during the ten-minutes' drive. At any other time, his eye would have taken in every thing as they drove along, — the abundant harvest, and the flocks of sheep, the filly in the paddock, and the short-horns at the farm. At any other time, he would have talked to the groom who sat beside him, of these and cognate matters; for his nature led him, like Sir Walter Scott, to question all those with whom he came in contact, on the subjects with which he supposed them to be best acquainted. But now it was clear that his thoughts were too deeply and anxiously occupied to heed the passing scene. He leaned back with folded arms, and looked straight before him, far beyond the winding road, the steep hillside, the village roofs and steeple; and he only roused himself when Lilly and Snowdrop dashed in at the gate of Laurel

Bank, and tore up the drive with a vehemence which their mistress never permitted when she held the ribbons.

His Newfoundland likeness was reposing majestically under the porch. He did not condescend to bark, or to disturb himself, for the familiar patter of those eight small hoofs. He stared at Douglas gravely, sniffed at his legs, and flopped his heavy tail once or twice upon the mat to indicate his permission that the stranger should ring the door-bell without further questioning on *his* part.

Davis looked surprised, and, if the truth must be said, not over-pleased, at the sight of a visitor a good three hours before the proper time, and when they were all so busy.

"No, sir, Mr. Vavasour is not at home, sir. He is out walking, sir."

"But you expect him in, I suppose, before very long?"

"Well, sir, I don't know." Davis was hesitating between dissatisfaction at a visitor's appearing *before his time*, and the hospitality which he generally offered vicariously. "There's a party, you see, to-day, sir. I suppose you couldn't return at three? Mr. Vavasour is sure to be in then, sir."

Without replying to this question, Douglas hesitated a moment, colored slightly, and said, "Is Miss Vavasour at home?"

"Yes, sir, she is," Davis answered with a resigned air; "but I don't know whether she can see you. Will you give me your name?"

Kate nearly let the basket of the arums and tropical leaves which she was carrying from the conservatory into the drawing-room drop from her arm as the card was placed in her hand.

"Show Mr. Douglas in immediately," she said in a hurried voice. Then she ran to the mirror, and tore off her shabby old garden-hat. The next moment she was holding out her hand to him.

"Hearing your father was out, Miss Vavasour, I ventured to" —

"Oh! he will be in immediately, and so glad to see you! I hardly thought you would be here till the end of the week."

"You did expect me, then?"

"Of course. Didn't you say you were coming?"

"I hear you have a party to-day. I fear my early visit is not well timed."

"I always think my friends' visits well timed, whenever they come," said Kate, smiling. "Besides, you are not in a violent hurry? I know papa hopes you will stay — a day or two, at least, if you are not engaged."

"That depends — I mean I am not sure whether Mr. Vavasour" — Then he stopped short. "Do you think he will let me have an

hour's conversation with him before your company arrive?"

"I am sure he will," said Kate, blushing; and she began arranging the flowers in a tall vase, to avoid the awkwardness of the inactive pause which followed.

Douglas walked up and down the room once or twice. He stood near her, and took up a frond of fern. He examined it in silence, then said, not without the evidence of a struggle to speak calmly, —

"My conduct at Folkestone must have seemed very strange to you?"

"No. You were a puzzle to most people, but not to me."

"Ah! it isn't what you fancy," he said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "It isn't because you are rich, and I am poor, that I have shrunk from telling you how much I love you. I came here, meaning to speak to your father before I said a word to you; but accident, I suppose, often decides a man's conduct. If I should go away a couple of hours hence, and never see you again, I can't bear that you should think me a heartless man-flirt, perhaps even mercenary."

"I should never think that," said Kate quickly. She had dropped the flowers, and was looking away. Her heart beat so loud and fast, that she thought he must hear it.

"There are reasons why I am

in honor bound to speak to your father before I ask if you love me well enough to forget my poverty, and every thing else against me. Do not answer now," he continued hurriedly, seeing that she was about to speak; "you might regret it an hour hence. But whatever happens, Miss Vavasour, remember this, — I have never loved any one but you, and I shall love you to the day of my death."

The door opened at that moment, and Vavasour appeared, heated from his walk, with Mrs. Fitzroy, cordial in manner, and rapid in utterance, as usual. He wrung the young man's hand.

"Very glad to see you here, Mr. Douglas. Very glad to make your acquaintance. You are not come to pay us a shabby morning visit? No one comes to Laurel Bank for less than three nights. Are your things at the station? I'll send for them."

"Thank you. I am not sure that I shall be able to stay" —

"Oh, come! I see you only want a little pressing. One night, at all events, you can spare, eh? We have a party to-day. Your services will be most acceptable to the ladies at lawn-tennis. If you insist on going in the morning, go you shall."

How bitterly Douglas regretted afterwards his weakness in yielding to temptation! To be in the same house for a few hours with

her, to breathe the same air, to watch her, even at a distance, was intoxication to him. Though he should leave that house sad and sobered for life, he lacked resolution to put away from him the cup that seemed so harmless. And Mr. Vavasour was evidently so well disposed towards him, that no wonder Christian anticipated the most favorable result to their interview; in which case, of course, every scruple as to his stay would be at an end. But, after all, it was a trifle upon which his decision turned — as important results often do in life. He would not have allowed Mr. Vavasour to send for his portmanteau there and then, but that he knew all the servants would be busy later, and that, to avoid inconvenience, he must make his decision now, and abide by it.

As Vavasour rang the bell, and gave orders that the dogcart should be sent to the station immediately for Mr. Douglas's luggage, Kate swept up the fragments of fern into her basket, and quietly left the room.

When the door closed behind Davis, the two men found themselves alone.

CHAPTER XII.

"Sit down, Mr. Douglas. Let us make ourselves comfortable, and have a chat here till luncheon, while the ladies adorn."

"I wished to have some conversation with you, Mr. Vavasour: it was my object in coming here. We are not liable to interruption?"

"Oh, no! We are safe from the ladies for at least half an hour."

"Can you guess what brings me here, Mr. Vavasour?"

"Well, without humbug, I *can*." He had prepared himself for this, so as not to commit Kate, and went on, "I may say I have heard from my sister, Lady Clive, of your admiration for my girl."

"And you were not outraged at my presumption?"

"Perhaps a little, at first," replied Vavasour with a smile. "We fathers of only children regard them as phoenixes. No man, in my opinion, is quite good enough for Kate; but, just for that very reason, I am disinclined to interfere in any way with her choice, — her deliberate choice, — when she makes it. All I have to look to is that his character will bear strict investigation."

"And his family?" asked Douglas in a low voice, his eyes looking anxiously into Vavasour's face.

"Oh! I am very indifferent about rank or family connections. I only" —

"You misunderstand me. You spoke about a man's character. I ask whether the character a man's family bears, his nearest rela-

tions," here his voice shook, "say his father and mother,—I ask whether their ill-repute would affect your decision, Mr. Vavasour."

"It would all depend—for instance, if—let us suppose the man to be illegitimate. I should not consider that sufficient ground for denying him my daughter."

"But if the guilt of father and mother were of a far deeper dye?"

Vavasour's countenance expressed his pained surprise.

"If they were criminal, perhaps it would."

"So I supposed: so I expected." There was an involuntary bitterness in the young fellow's tone. "That is why I felt it would not be honorable to try and entangle your daughter in an engagement until I had spoken to you. I believe Miss Vavasour likes me. Unless a man is a vain fool, he does not deceive himself in such a matter as this. But I have next to nothing; and, unless it is with your full consent, I shall never ask her to marry me."

"Well, let me hear what you have to say, Mr. Douglas," said Vavasour, playing impatiently with a paper-knife on the table.

"I must ask you to listen to a long story, and to me a very painful one," returned the young soldier, leaning his head on his hand, and looking down for a moment before he began. "It is a story,

which, unfortunately, is but too well known abroad. In England, if the details are known, people do not connect them in any way with me; for I have changed my name. I have never told any one. Why should I? But now it is different. For honor's sake, Mr. Vavasour, I dare not keep silence."

"Right. Go on, young man: I am all attention. What was your father's name?"

"Hunt. He was a rich man *once*."

"Ah! Common name: I know two or three. And how did he lose his money?"

"By gambling. That was the beginning of his downward course. When he married my poor mother, he was *only* a gambler; a few years later, he was a *blackleg*, a ruined man, who, since he could not win by fair means, took to foul. My blood boils now when I think of the life my unhappy mother led when I was a boy. I did not know all then: I never shall know all she had to endure. But my father's uncle, old John Douglas, who adopted me after my father's death, and left me his name, with what little fortune he had, told me much. It is an awful thing for a son to say, Mr. Vavasour," and the young man bowed his face between his hands; "but, if there ever was a scoundrel upon earth, it was my father.

He made my mother, who was beautiful, a decoy to get men into his clutches. The house was full of Russian princes, and rich foreigners of other countries, from whom my father *won* nightly at cards. There was but one Englishman among them, who passed for being wealthy, though, in truth, he was only reckless, and heavily in debt. He was clever, bold, and unscrupulous. He fell in love with my mother, and wormed himself into her confidence. Unhappily, it was not a difficult task. She was utterly wretched; and hers was a nature that wanted sympathy, that could not brook neglect. I had been at school for nearly a year, — my father had sent me there to be out of his way, — and my mother had nothing to break the monotony of her dreadful life, but the friendship of this fellow. He had long suspected my father of cheating at cards: one night he detected him. He went to my mother, and said, "Your husband is a card-sharper. If you remain with him, now that you know this, you become his accomplice." Stung with shame and horror, she declared, that, *if* it were proved, she did not care what became of her, but she would not live another day with him. There was a terrible scene that night. Several people were present. Marked cards were found in my father's

hand. He put a bold face upon it, denied every thing; and there were one or two present who believed, or affected to believe him. But my mother was not one of those: the case was too clear for her to doubt. Poor thing! she was goaded to madness. I try to excuse her, though the world never will. She fled that night. The men who had stuck to my father told him that his only chance of regaining his position was to call out the man who had robbed him of his honor. He followed him to France, — for all this took place at Baden, — called him out, and was killed by his antagonist just ten days after my mother's elopement.

"That is the disgraceful story of my parents," continued Christian in a husky voice, — "the story that will weigh me down as long as I live. Nothing can shake it off. Though I have changed my name, though I never see my unhappy mother, (how can I see the wife of my father's murderer?) I can't forget the shame: I can't *get rid* of it. It is this, Mr. Vavasour, that has held me back. I feel how unlikely it is, though you might overlook my poverty, that you can forgive the stain upon my name. All I can do is to prove my own honesty by telling you the facts."

"It redounds to your credit that you have done so," said

Vavasour in his impulsive way; and he stretched out his hand, and grasped the young man's kindly. "I know how painful it must have been. But I am not disposed to visit the sins of fathers upon their children—especially when their fathers are *dead*. To tell you the truth, I was fully prepared to hear that you were not legitimate, but the natural son of Mr. John Douglas."

"I wish I were!" said Christian bitterly. "God knows I should look upon that dishonor as nothing compared with what I suffer. Old John was as good as the best father to me from the time I was ten years old till I was seventeen, when he died. I was always called Douglas; and, when he died, he left every thing he had to me. It is not much, but enough to make me independent."

"Do you hold any communication with your mother? Is she happy?"

Christian shook his head.

"She is a widow now for the second time, and so, I trust, less wretched than she has been for years. Her crime brought its punishment with it. She had a sad life with her second husband. His temper was fearful; and he fell into bad health. Of course, she was not visited, and this made him savage. Remorse, poverty, slight, the consequences of all, were visited on her. How she

stood it, I can't think. He died three years ago. I saw her once after that. I had not seen her since I was a little boy. We do not correspond, and we never meet: it would only be painful to us both. *She* cannot forget that she deserted me, her only child; and I, though I pity her from my heart, and would make any sacrifice to secure her peace and comfort for the remainder of her days, cannot"—he winced as if stung—"no, I cannot forget, either. I have given her up half my income, Mr. Vavasour; but it is better we should not meet—no!"

"You shall give her up *the whole*," said Vavasour, laying his hand on Christian's shoulder. Then he stood up, and went on in his quick, eager way, as though he could hardly find words in which to express his resolution fast enough. "Kate has quite sufficient for you both. You're a very fine fellow, and I might search the world through before I found one I should like as well to be her husband. There, now you have my decision!"

Christian could not speak. He grasped the hand of the generous-hearted father who had uttered those few words, which turned all this young man's darkness into light. Then he walked to the window, that his face might not be seen.

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A quarter of an hour later, as the two men sat talking, the gong sounded for luncheon. There was a rustle of silk and muslin; and Mrs. Fitzroy and Kate, leaving their rooms in all their "bravery" for the afternoon, followed one another down the oak stairs, and crossed the hall into the drawing-room.

It is an anxious moment for Kate. She will read by the expression of those faces, as she enters, what is her fate. She does not *really* doubt: she knows her kind, unworldly father too well. Still her heart beats quick, and her cheek is flushed, as she steps along, a yard or so behind Mrs. Fitzroy's train of silvery silk.

Christian Douglas's back is towards the door. Both men rise as the ladies enter. Kate shoots a rapid glance at her father. His brow is unruffled; his black eyes beam with smiles.

Her eyes quickly turn to Christian. He is leaning against the table, close to which he stood when he turned round. He is deadly pale, even to the lips, upon which there sits no shadow of gladness; and his eyes are fixed upon Mrs. Fitzroy, who has stopped midway in the room, and seems uncertain whether to advance, or not. So much Kate perceives, though she can only see her back.

"Let me introduce you to Mrs.

Fitzroy, Mr. Douglas," says Vavasour cheerfully.

At this moment, Mrs. Fitzroy's gold scent-bottle falls from her relaxed fingers, and rolls towards Douglas's feet. She makes a feint of stooping for it: their hands meet; and she murmurs something which *may* pass for her thanks to eyes and ears less alert than the astonished girl's behind her. But, as she takes Vavasour's proffered arm, something in Mrs. Fitzroy's face strikes even him; for he says with solicitude, —

"I am afraid we took too long a walk. The heat was too much for you. You don't look quite well."

"I shall be better after luncheon," she replies; but the effort that it cost her to pronounce those words is seen in the nervous, muscular movement of the throat. To Kate's eyes, the woman, as she passes her, looks as if suddenly aged by many years. There is an expression of agony in that face she will never forget.

Christian seems scarcely less moved. He never raises his eyes to Kate's face. He offers his arm in silence. What does it all mean? The girl is stupefied, bewildered: she can find no words to utter. There is only one indication that he is not completely unconscious whose hand it is that lies upon his arm. As they cross the hall, he presses that hand con-

vulsively against his heart, then, moved by a swift impulse, raises it to his dry, burning lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE only one of the four persons seated at that table who was entirely at ease, nay, in brilliant spirits, was the host. The silence of his guests seemed to stimulate him to unusual loquacity.

"Let us have a bottle of champagne, Davis, in honor of — well, I'll say to fortify us for the fatigues of the afternoon."

Mrs. Fitzroy, at all events, needed it. She could swallow no food; but she drank off a tumbler full of the wine, and her marvelous powers of representation returned to her, in some measure. She talked a little, and even smiled; but she did not over-act the part. It was the courageous endeavor of a woman physically overwrought, to battle against depression. So it appeared to the solicitous eyes of her admiring friend.

Christian never spoke to her. He recovered himself sufficiently to say a few words to Kate, and to reply when Mr. Vavasour directly addressed him. But men are rarely as good actors as women; and, in this particular man, the histrionic element was entirely wanting. He was painfully pre-occupied, and he scarcely tried to

conceal it. Vavasour could not fail to be struck by this; but as, up to an hour ago, Douglas was an entire stranger to him, he could not tell but that this gloomy reserve was habitual to the young man, if, indeed, it was not the consequence of those distressing disclosures which he had felt in honor bound to make to Vavasour. This seemed the more natural explanation of what puzzled the kindly-hearted father a little; for was it conceivable that his bright, cheery Kate should be captivated by a dull, undemonstrative man? No. And as Vavasour had felt cordially drawn towards his future son-in-law in the course of this interview, he only regretted that Douglas should appear to such disadvantage before Mrs. Fitzroy. Kate's secret had been carefully guarded: no hint had ever dropped from her father's lips, in conversation with his fair friend, that the girl's affections were engaged. The nearest approach to it had been, when in the course of their walk, that very day, he had said, that in the event of Kate's marrying soon, which was "not altogether impossible," he should feel very lonely, and be justified in forming new ties, which he never would do as long as his daughter remained unmarried. Douglas's name had never been mentioned in Mrs. Fitzroy's hearing. She could have no clew to connect the

marriage to which Vavasour had distinctly referred, with an impetuous young soldier, when she knew there were Lord Henrys and Sir Georges by the dozen, eager to snap up the young heiress. Therefore Vavasour felt sorry that Christian Douglas, who had only his personal merits to recommend him, should not show himself in a more favorable light to the brilliant, critical woman who met him for the first time.

The dawn of disquietude in a young heart is a theme, which, like all that pertains to human passion, cannot but have infinite variety, for no two souls are alike; and the poet, who draws his inspiration direct from nature, furnishes with each individual type a subject for fresh study.

Kate, for all her scorn of suspicion, was no fool who wilfully blinded herself to facts. Those of which she was now a witness could be explained, it appeared to her, in one way only. It was not the first time Mrs. Fitzroy and Christian had met; and he knew—and she knew that he knew—that about her, which had literally paralyzed him on finding her an inmate of this house. All that the Italian had suggested, then, was possibly true, after all. Christian would not lightly believe evil of any one: he must be certain of his facts. Kate fancied that she could tell all that his chivalrous

heart was suffering,—the conflict that must be going on within him, between his manly repugnance to betray a woman, and his horror at finding one whose dark secret he held a close companion of Kate.

The girl's quick mind travelled over a thousand fields of conjecture in the course of luncheon. What would he do? Would he speak to her father? Would he seek an interview with Mrs. Fitzroy, and persuade her to plead some excuse for leaving the house at once? That she could be brought to do this, Kate did not doubt; for the way in which Mrs. Fitzroy avoided Christian's eye was not lost on Kate. It showed the strange power he possessed over their mysterious visitor. No suspicion of *him* ever crossed the girl's mind. It was sad enough, as it was, that her growing trust in this woman should be rudely shattered; that the liking, which, for her father's sake, she had sought to ripen somewhat prematurely into friendship, should come to a sudden end. Her poor father! The thought of his disillusion and distress heartily grieved Kate. Was he, indeed, so blind, that he could not perceive the truth as she perceived it in the conduct of those two persons?

Before the end of luncheon, Kate's own course seemed clear to her. Eager as she was to learn from Christian's own lips the con-

firmation of the glad tidings which she had read in her father's eyes, she decided, that, in the difficult position in which her lover was placed, it was better that she should restrain her impatience a while, and afford Mrs. Fitzroy the opportunity of an interview alone with Christian. If matters were as Kate could not doubt, it would be better for her father, it would be better for every one, that Mrs. Fitzroy should not remain here an hour longer. This very afternoon might bring with it insult and annoyance. She knew her dear father's hot temper; and now that Kate had grounds for *believing* the ill that had been spoken, she dreaded its being repeated to her father by some *quidnunc* of the neighborhood, whom he might possibly knock down. She would have braved all to protect a woman who was aspersed. She shrank from exposing her father to needless distress—it might be even worse—for the sake of one concerning whom her opinions were now in a state of chaos. The bandage must be torn from his eyes: how could it be done with so little pain to him as by Mrs. Fitzroy's flight?

As they rose from table, she said, "Papa, I want you to come and look at the marquee; and there are several important things I must ask you about before the people come. The band will be

broiled in that place where they have put their stands; and I am sure there are not half enough seats on the lawn."

So she linked her arm within her father's, and led him off.

"Well?" she said eagerly, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Well, dear papa?"

"Well," he repeated, laughing, "you and your young soldier are a queer couple, Katie. Lads and lasses were different in *my* day. He looks as glum as if I'd given him the sack, which I haven't; and you, instead of coming out into this shrubbery with *him*, and hearing what he's got to tell you, you come to *me*! Hang it all! Is this love-making now-a-days?"

Kate attempted no defence of it: she only laid her head on her father's shoulder, and said, —

"I want so to know what he said, papa, and what you think of him."

"Well, I think him a straightforward, honorable fellow. He told me a great deal about his parents which he need *not* have told me: many a young man would have been silent; for he has changed his name. It is a discreditable story; and I needn't shock you with it, Kate. But the only effect it had was to give me confidence in a fellow who insisted on my knowing every thing about him before he proposed for you."

Kate threw her arms round her father's neck.

"Dear papa, I am so glad! I knew you would like him. He is so noble!"

"Well, I believe it. I hope he is a little more lively, eh? — just a little more, sometimes? He strikes me as awfully silent for a young man; but then I'm fond of talking. And, after all, if *you* don't think him dull, Kate" —

"To-day, papa, he was not himself. You must not judge him by to-day. He can be so pleasant! You'll see how different he is to-morrow."

They walked up and down the shady shrubbery for some time, conversing on the subject close to Kate's heart. Then, as the hour advanced, she led her father to the marquee, and was engaged in seeing some final arrangements carried out for the forthcoming entertainment, when she felt her shoulder tapped in an ominous manner; and, turning, she beheld Miss Tarragon standing over her, like Fate, awful and portentous.

"Come this way!" the spinster whispered sternly. "I *must* speak with you instantly, Kate! It is worse, *far worse*, than I thought! I came here early, on purpose to communicate a very painful fact; but what I have just witnessed surpasses in horror, in scandalous atrocity, all I could have conceived. Come this way,

Kate, where I shall not be overheard."

And, seizing Kate's arm, Miss Tarragon stalked across the lawn, pouring forth her terrible story into the girl's ear as they walked along.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. FITZROY and Christian were alone in the drawing-room.

They were seated on the same sofa. Her fair head was bowed; and the young man held both her hands in his. His eyes were bent somewhat sternly on her as he asked, —

"Mother, what brought you here?"

"O Christian! Oh, my boy! Ask, rather, what fatality has brought *you*. Here, far from the world, I thought I could not harm you. I have been so anxious that you should not suffer further shame through *me*! But, in the house of the only friend I have in the world, I believed I was safe; for I shunned every one, and no one knew my story."

"Ay, that's just it. Forgive me, mother, if I say it. Would you be here if they *did*?"

She shook her head sadly; and her voice trembled as she replied, —

"No. But leave me here a little longer. Let me make the avowal at my own time. You have re-

nounced me, Christian ; and I say nothing — I do not complain. It is the just penalty I pay for abandoning you as a child. But why, then, *why*, do you pursue me here ? ”

“ Pursue ? I knew nothing of your being here. I came — no matter why. What is certain is, that *one* of us must go.”

“ My boy ! Do not drive me away. If you knew — it is my last chance of peace and happiness on earth ; and I have had so little ! ”

“ God knows I pity you, mother ; and, if I could do any thing to make you happy, I would. But for us to remain under one roof, both playing parts, both deceiving Mr. Vavasour, is impossible.”

She clung to him : she laid her head on his shoulder.

“ Be generous, Christian. Leave me. What can it be to *you*, — a few days here, — you, who have all the world before you ? To me it is life, it is every thing.”

“ How long do you mean to remain ? ” he asked after a moment’s pause.

She hesitated, then murmured low, “ Forever — if I may.”

He started up, and walked to the end of the room, and back.

“ You would not betray me ! ” she cried with a passionate burst of tears. “ O God ! to have been hunted as I have been, to have found a haven at last, and then to

be driven from it, — and by my own son, — it would be hard ! It would be hard ! ”

He stood opposite to her.

“ What does this mean ? Speak plainly, mother.”

“ It means this, — that William Vavasour is the only man who ever really cared for me. He loves me still, and will marry me, Christian. In devoting the remainder of my life to him, I shall find peace and happiness. Do not, do not, rob me of it ! ”

“ Why, *then* — My God ! It is impossible. Why, *then* ” —

The young man broke off, and once more turned from her.

“ Is this a hideous dream ? ”

He walked rapidly up and down the room, then threw himself into a chair at the table, with his back to her, and buried his head in his hands.

“ One of us must be sacrificed,” he murmured to himself, — “ my mother, or I. She doesn’t know of Kate, my Kate, my love ! O God ! must I give her up, or drive this poor woman from the home that is open to her ? O mother, mother ! ” he groaned aloud, “ what is this sacrifice you ask of me ? It is too much : I cannot, I cannot.”

She came and stood beside him. She did not touch him. Her fingers clasped each other convulsively, and she spoke with a forced calmness, —

"I know that you cannot forget my desertion of you as a child. I ask you only in charity to remember how bitterly I have expiated that sinful act. I will not speak of your father, Christian. God alone knows all I suffered till I was driven mad. But think of the punishment, beginning with the tragedy of which I knew that I was the cause, the cruelty and neglect of the man who had led me to commit my sin, and, worse than all, the burthen of remorse, and the knowledge that you, my only child, were lost to me forever. Is it not enough? Have mercy on your mother! Do not be harder than God, who would lighten the burthen that has bowed me to the earth these fourteen years."

A low groan burst from the young man's buried face.

"And I, with life before me, must give up every hope! Ah, why did you ever have a son?" he cried bitterly. "First to abandon him, then subject him to this torture!"

She threw herself upon her knees: she seized his hands with a wild entreaty in her gesture.

"I *am* your mother, Christian. Think of it. I nursed you on this breast. I would never, never have left you, had he not sent you away, then driven me mad by his conduct. Do not be cruel. If

this blow is dealt by *your* hand, Christian, it will kill me."

He lifted a white-set face, in the lines of which self-conquest after the soul's mighty struggle was written.

"God help me! I will not. If any act of mine can atone to you for your past sufferings, let my life, my happiness, be sacrificed!"

"Your happiness? Why do you say that?"

"No matter. Only promise me one thing." He took her hands and raised her; and, as he did so, his deep sorrowful eyes looked into hers. "You will tell him *all* before you become his wife?"

"I will."

"Then good-by, mother. Good-by, perhaps forever. I must leave this house at once."

"Will you never come and see me here when—when I bear *another name*?" she asked in a low, trembling voice.

"Never. I shall exchange as soon as I can into a regiment for India."

"I am banishing you: I am driving you away!" cried the poor woman, with a fresh burst of agonized tears.

"No: it is self-banishment. Calm yourself, mother. Our meetings are only painful to us both. Henceforth it is better that they should be impossible."

The form of Miss Tarragon appeared at this moment at the win

dow; but the occupants of the drawing-room were too absorbed to perceive her.

Mrs. Fitzroy threw her arms around her son's neck.

"Oh, my darling! do not go. Why should you?"

"Because honor forbids that I should remain."

"Say that you forgive me, Christian," she sobbed.

"I do; and may you be happy."

Miss Tarragon heard no more. She saw the young man kiss Mrs. Fitzroy as she fell back upon the sofa; and, before he could turn to the window, the spinster had vanished.

"Your eyes must have deceived you," said Kate in a faint voice.

Alas! a horrible dread was doing battle in her mind with that loyalty that never would admit distrust. It was impossible to deny that every thing pointed towards Miss Tarragon's deductions as the true solution of the mystery which surrounded Christian's relations with Mrs. Fitzroy. He had loved her once, and was ashamed to find her in this house. "But no, no!" cried the girl's heart, "not until he tells me so, not until I know it beyond doubt, will I believe it."

"Your eyes must have deceived you," she repeated.

"They did *not*. Do you think I'm a fool, Kate Vavasour? I saw her arms round his neck, I saw

him kiss her, as plain as I see you. And do you suppose my *ears* were deceived also? I heard those very words. Make out of them what you can. They only confirm what we heard yesterday, — that this woman is an improper person: she has no business here."

"That may be so," said Kate hurriedly. "I know not what to think. But that Mr. Douglas should — should behave so is impossible. What your ears heard I *can* believe. He said that 'honor forbade him to remain;' that is, as long as Mrs. Fitzroy was here. Though I do not understand it, I can conceive this possible: it may be explained. But that he should behave unlike a gentleman in this house, I will not believe."

"Pshaw!" returned Miss Tarragon. "All men are alike. But the *man's* behavior is of no importance. It is the *woman's* you have to think of. She must go, and go at once."

Poor Kate! she felt so harassed and distressed, she knew not what to say, or where to turn for advice. She would have fled from her persecutor, had it been possible. She would fain have sought the solitude of her chamber, had it been but for ten minutes, to collect and calm her agitated thoughts. The company was beginning to arrive, however. Mrs. Loveden, with Alcibiades in full regimentals,

was looming in the distance. The sound of wheels on the gravel approach proclaimed that some of the more distant neighbors were come. There was no escape, no turning-back, for poor Kate: she must go through the torture of receiving these people, no matter how cruel her anxiety.

"Here is your hero, my sweet Kate," cried Mrs. Loveden; and, as she approached, Miss Tarragon strode off. "Doesn't he look noble, my dear? Turn round, Alcibiades, and show yourself behind. How beautifully your coat fits! And hold yourself up. This is his martial cloak, Kate. You know those beautiful lines on the death of Sir John Moore, —

'With his martial cloak around him.'

When wrapped in its folds, Alcibiades' form is really most imposing. Would you like to see him draw his sword? It will give you some idea of him in battle."

But Kate was too faint and sick at heart even to smile. Where was Christian? Why did he not seek her? What did it all mean? The summer wind played among the leaves. The band began tuning their instruments. Lion approached, and sniffed at each of them gravely in turn. She saw it all, and noted it with one-half of her mind, while the other groped wearily in this darkness of incertitude. She looked round for her

father; but he, too, was not to be seen.

"Alcibiades," whispered his anxious parent, "now is your opportunity. Begin: you know what you have to say."

"No, I don't. I've forgotten the words," returned the hero.

"Oh, yes, my love! you remember about the cold of Canada and the heat of the West Indies, and your life's devotion. — My sweetest Kate, Alcibiades is burning to communicate something to you."

"What is it?" said Kate listlessly.

"Why," said the youth, shambling from one foot to the other, and twisting his fingers in his sword-knot, — "why, you see, I'm going away; and, if I wasn't so glad, of course I should be awfully sorry, and all that" —

"Oh, *that's* not it!" gasped his distressed mamma, *sotto voce*; then, aloud, "He means that his heart is broken at the thought of leaving you; that the memory of your sweet face" —

"Yes, that's it!" cried Alcibiades, enlightened by a sudden though treacherous flash of recollection, — "that's it, you know; and neither the heat of Canada, nor the cold of the West Indies" —

("Cold of Canada, and heat of West Indies," prompted Mrs. Loveden.)

"What does it matter? You

put me out, mamma. I forget now what they can do."

"Can ever make you forget her."

"Can ever make me forget her" —

("Not *her!* *you.*")

"Oh, yes! me." Alcibiades was now hopelessly confused. "And—and I think it would be rather jolly, if I" —

("Not 'jolly!' I said 'the greatest joy of your life.'")

"Greatest joy of my life, if I — that is, if you — that is, if both were to promise — before I go" —

"Why, I declare, we are interrupting a proposal!" cried Mrs. Crowe, who had approached, with the admiral, across the lawn, unseen by Alcibiades and his mother.

"Why do you make a merry-andrew of the boy, ma'am?" asked the admiral sternly, pointing at Alcibiades with his stick. Then, bringing it smartly to the ground, he addressed the shame-faced youth, "And you, sir, why do you bring your country's uniform into ridicule by parading in it here, hundreds of miles away from your regiment? By gad, sir! your impudence and vanity are matchless."

"Come, it's no fault of his, if he is matchless," laughed Mrs. Crowe.

Mrs. Loveden was dissolved in tears.

"Gad! it is a sign of the times," pursued the admiral. "It is all

of a piece. The service is going to the Devil!"

"And Alcibiades wishes to go ready-mated. His will be a Lucifer-match."

No one laughs at Mrs. Crowe's sally; and the veteran turns testily to Kate —

"Where's your father?"

"I don't know."

"I do," chuckled Mrs. Crowe. "I saw him with Mrs. Fitzroy, through the drawing-room window as I passed."

Kate winces visibly: she feels that she cannot stand much more of this. She sees fresh guests arriving, and she moves away towards them; but she hears the admiral say, as soon as her back is turned, —

"Well, manners are changed since my day. A host used to receive his friends; but now the depravity of the age is such, ma'am, that a man forgets all his duties for the sake of a painted woman."

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTIAN DOUGLAS, crushed at heart, had left his mother to seek an interview with Kate at once. But, as he stepped from the conservatory, he saw her on the lawn, surrounded by her guests, and his courage failed him. He turned aside to a bench under a cedar, where he sat down to think over the sorry part he must play

in this farewell scene. Explanation was denied him. He had promised to allow his mother to make her avowal when she thought fit; and his lips were therefore sealed as to the cause of his changed conduct. He dreaded to meet Kate now. What could he say? How could he make her believe that he was not so unworthy of her as his behavior would make him appear? He would wait a while. He had two good hours before the train started; and, when the company had all arrived, he could better obtain a quarter of an hour's uninterrupted interview with Miss Vavasour. So there he sat, within a stone's-throw of her he loved so dearly, and yet had given up forever, unobserved, beneath the black arms and blue-green foliage of the tree, as hopeless and miserable a young man as could have been found in England.

Vavasour, entering the drawing-room suddenly, on leaving his daughter in the clutches of Miss Tarragon, had found Mrs. Fitzroy, pale and motionless, upon the sofa.

The excitement of the unhappy woman's passionate pleading with her son had borne her up until he had left her; then her strength had fairly given way. She felt incapable of further effort, and lay there, lacking even the strength necessary to crawl up to her own room.

Vavasour walked rapidly to the sofa, drew a chair close to it, and sat down, taking up the marble hand that lay beside him. He was so elated with his morning's work, that, unused as he was to repression, he could not resist the temptation which this opportunity presented of opening his full heart to his friend. He had a well-grounded conviction that the glad tidings he had to tell would animate her. The vague terms in which he had spoken that very morning, the hint he had dropped, had brought the blood to that pale cheek, and something akin to a smile, which had hovered for a moment over that lovely mouth. He could speak plainly and unreservedly now, and he would do so. Miss Tarragon was the only guest who had arrived. He was secure from interruption for a few minutes, at all events, and he would profit by it.

"Are you still tired, Amabel? Come, you must rouse yourself. I have a piece of news which I hope will please you almost as much as it does me."

She heard his genial, kindly voice: she felt the warm pressure of his hand, to which her powerless fingers could hardly give any sympathetic return. She murmured, with closed eyes, —

"You may be sure I am glad of any thing that gives you pleasure."

"Kate is engaged to be married:

that is my news. I told you this morning there was a possibility of this. It is now settled. And this being so —

She had opened her eyes, and had raised them with an eager, almost startled look to his. Her breathing came quicker; and the hand he held trembled.

"And this being so," he continued, "I am free to say to you, as I did twenty-six years ago, 'Will you be my wife?' *Then* it meant, will you share a poor young fellow's fortunes? *Now* it means, will you brighten an old man's solitude? You see what I am grown, and what my monotonous life is. Could you be contented passing the remainder of your days with me here?"

As he spoke, the life had indeed returned into her face. She sat upright, her eyes beaming, while she pushed the hair back from her brow. It had come at last, then, — the supreme moment for which she had striven. She had won the haven of peace, and the devotion of the only man on earth she cared to win.

"This is the happiest moment I have known for years," was her reply.

"All right: that's settled," said he in his odd, quick way. "You shall make up for lost time."

"Ah, lost indeed!" she sighed. "The foolish girl did not prize the

gift you then bestowed: the woman who has suffered, William, does so. But before I accept your hand, before I let you pledge yourself to me, I must tell you something, William, — something I shrink from telling." She began in trembling accents, then paused, and looked beseechingly into his face.

"If it pains you, do not tell me," he said quickly: "I don't want to know it."

"I must, I must: I cannot let you remain in ignorance any longer. I have promised; and, besides that, honor forbids my silence. You are deceived in me. You imagine me to be good and spotless. I am not so, alas!"

"Who *is*? No one that I know."

"Ah! But the sin — the sin that men *never* forgive a woman," she continued with a nervous breathlessness, — "can your great charity ever cover that?"

"What *can* you mean?" he asked, lowering his voice. "In Heaven's name speak out!"

"I mean, that, if you marry me, it will be the greatest sacrifice a man *can* make for a wife. You will marry a woman on whose fair fame there is a blot."

"A *blot*? Are you dreaming, Amabel? A blot on *your* fair name? Oh, impossible!"

"Why do you suppose I avoided all these people? Because I feel

myself an outcast, and justly so. William, I broke God's law and man's. Heaven knows I have been punished. The man with whom I fled from a bad husband made my life a hell for eleven years."

"Good God! This is terrible indeed! Poor thing, poor thing!" he repeated with an accent of mingled pity and horror.

"Shame and disgust at my husband's conduct drove me from him. I have no other excuse to plead, not even love. I cannot expect you to forget or forgive this, William. If the avowal raises a barrier between us, I know that you are more than justified."

He had turned very pale, and laid his thin clinched hand upon his heart, as he said tremulously, —

"It has hurt me here. I will not deny it. I had set you on a pinnacle from which you have dashed yourself. Well, I honor you, at least, for this act of courage. If I had heard the story from other lips, I should not have felt the certainty that I do that your sin is wiped out by repentance."

She shook her head sadly.

"Nothing on this side of the grave can really wipe out the past."

"Love can! That is all powerful to heal old wounds, if not to efface the scars. This past misery shall *not* be a barrier to our happiness."

He spoke with his old quickness and decision now.

"Can you be happy — are you sure you can, when the world points its finger at your wife?" she asked.

"Those who live for the world may care for what it says," he replied. "We will live for one another, and take comfort in a higher law than man's, which said, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.'"

"Noble, generous friend!" She could scarcely speak for emotion.

"Remember," he continued, "all this could not be, unless my Kate were married. I would sacrifice all my hopes, if their fulfilment could injure her. But when my child has left me, when she is gone away with her soldier" —

The door opened, and Davis appeared at this moment. He did not advance into the room, but said with a deprecating air, —

"I beg your pardon, sir; but I thought you would like to know that several of the company are arrived."

"All right: I'm coming." And, as Davis disappeared, Vavasour rose and approached the window, from which one or two groups were seen upon the lawn.

"Who is her soldier?" asked Mrs. Fitzroy with some curiosity. "Who is the fortunate man who has won dear Kate?"

The reply, which was begun at the window, behind Mrs. Fitzroy, was continued as Vavasour walked back, and leaned over the sofa on which she sat.

"It is the young fellow you met at luncheon,—Christian Douglas. You are right, he is a fortunate man to win my Kate; not because he is poor, nor because he lies under the stain of having had a father who was a scoundrel, and a mother who deserted him. Think of that! think of a mother deserting her child. These are drawbacks that would be considered insuperable by many fathers; but it is not because of this I call him fortunate: it is because my Kate has bestowed her heart on him; and hers is not a nature that will ever change. I have given my consent, for I suffered once myself from disappointed love, Amabel. And of what use are our trials, eh? if they don't teach us profitable lessons for our children? Where two young hearts are joined, we, who know life, and how little of honest, faithful love there is, should hesitate to sunder them. Don't you agree with me?"

She had sat there absolutely motionless, as if turned to stone. No one who had not seen the light die out suddenly from her face, and the expression of unutterable anguish that came there as he spoke, could have told that she

was suffering. And Vavasour, standing behind the sofa on which he leaned, could not see her face. All he saw, when he had done speaking, was a hand that plucked nervously at the flounces of her dress: all he heard was a voice that labored to speak calmly, and replied,—

"I do."

He thought he understood all that was passing through her mind,—(how often we deceive ourselves in this respect!) how the recollection of her own early faithlessness smote her, and then all the sad consequences of a loveless union. And, to dissipate her gloomy retrospect, he said in his old cheery way,—

"I've given Kate her marching-orders. She'll tramp off with her 'brave soldier-boy;' and you and I, Amabel, will live here like Darby and Joan. The young folks will come and visit us from time to time, till Christian Douglas has won all the laurels his ambition craves. Then they shall make their home with us. This is what the future promises me now."

"It seldom fulfils its promises," she murmured.

"Ah! It promised me once that you should be my wife; and, after keeping me waiting twenty-six years, it redeems its promise at last. Why should I doubt it, when it has behaved so honorably?" he laughed. "But I must

go, or Davis will be after me again. Hang those people! I wish them all at the deuse to-day. Will you not come with me into the garden?" And he extended his hand. "Come."

She took it, though she did not attempt to rise.

"You must let me be alone this afternoon. Do not ask me to meet all these people. Indeed, I am unfit for it, and should only break down in the effort." Then, moved by a sudden impulse, she bowed her head, and pressed to her lips, with something like a sob, the hand she held. "May God make you happy, William! I think you are the best man that ever lived."

"What a bad lot you must have known, to think so!" he said with a smile, as he leaned over the sofa, and kissed her brow. "Remember, my happiness is in your keeping now: so take care of yourself, Mrs. Vavasour, and goodbye for the present."

Then, when he had passed through the conservatory into the garden, when he was fairly gone, the unhappy woman's powers of endurance broke down, and with a cry of agony she buried her face in the cushions of the sofa.

"Oh! must it be?" she cried. "Just as success had crowned my only hope? What is to become of me now? I am not old. I have so many years to drag on

this weary life! O William, we have met once more!—too late, too late! Have I the selfishness to part these young hearts? Shall I for the second time forget my son, and sacrifice him who gave himself for *me*, without a word? I have nothing left but ashes: he, the flame that burns so pure and bright in youth. Oh, my son, my son! come back to me again. I'll give up every thing for you; only don't shrink from me, don't abandon me. Give me strength. Ah, there are voices!—If it should be William! I dare not see him. I dare not look upon his face again;" and she staggered to her feet.

Then, with tottering steps, she groped her way to the door, like a blind woman, and slowly mounted the oak stairs to her own room.

CHAPTER XVI.

KATE's powers of representation, mean time, had reached their limit. The torture she was enduring rendered it more difficult to her, every moment, to play her part with moderate self-possession.

The company continued to arrive; but still neither her father nor Christian Douglas appeared. When, at last, she saw the former approaching rapidly from the house, his face all beaming, his voice jubilant, his hands extended

to greet the world at large with that cordiality which betokens a heart well at ease, Kate could contain herself no longer. Running up to him, she linked her arm in his, and whispered,—

“O papa! *where* is he? What have you done with him?”

“Done with him? Faith, I’ve done nothing; haven’t seen him! I have been — But no, I can’t tell you now. — Ah, Boycott! how d’ye do?”

“Heartily, thank you, Vavasour. What a grand *croakey* party (it was thus he pronounced it) you have got, to be sure! Military band, and all. And where is your beautiful friend, that all the ladies are so jealous of, eh?”

“Tired, and gone to her room. Jealous of her, are they? H’m. I say, have you seen a young man about the garden, by chance, — a military-looking young fellow in a Norfolk blouse?”

“Oh, yes! I met him at the station, and spoke to him. Saw him again just now, under a tree. Seemed *mopey*, I thought; scarcely answered me when I addressed him.”

Kate, standing by, heard every word that fell from the good captain’s lips, while she was apparently interested in a discussion on some stringent rules at croquet, that two young ladies and two young gentlemen were carrying on with much warmth.

“Will you begin a game at once?” she asked suddenly. “Games of four are so much better than large ones!” and she led the way to that part of the lawn devoted to croquet, which was near the old cedar. Having established the quartet there, she approached the tree with slow and hesitating steps. Yes, there he sat (she could see him now) in an attitude of profound dejection. But, at sight of her, he rose at once, and joined her. His first words were spoken with visible constraint.

“Miss Vavasour, I am come to wish you good-by.”

“What does this mean?” she said quickly. “I thought — I thought you were going to stay with us a day or two, at least.”

“I told you this morning, I feared I might have to go away at once, and never see you again. My fear is realized: I must go.”

“Yes; but papa” — she stopped short, and colored. “I cannot understand this. Will you not speak openly?”

“It is impossible. You can’t understand it now: you will some day.”

She paused, and pressed her fingers tightly together, before she said nervously, —

“Make a friend of papa.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot.”

There was another pause.

"Do you know what he will think?"

"He will think me mad, or worse, after all his kindness to me, to fly from Laurel Bank, to turn my back upon the happiness I had sought, and hoped, two hours ago, I might have won. But I cannot explain my conduct. It bears the worst construction, and — my lips are sealed!"

"I would not believe it!" cried Kate passionately. "When they told me, I would not believe it."

"Believe what? Not that I am untrue? You *may* believe me when I take Heaven to witness that you are the only woman for whom" —

"This is not the time for protestations. The fewer now, Mr. Douglas, the better."

"Do not part from me in anger. In a few days, I shall sail for India, never to return. I have no hope left in life: every thing seems dead in me. Don't add to my despair by doubting my truth. I am *bound* by a cruel duty" —

But Kate's indignation broke in again.

"I wish to hear no more. If you have never loved another, then your sin is doubled in my eyes. You have not the excuse of a boyish passion, as I hoped; and yet you say you are *bound*! Go; and may God forgive you the evil you have wrought here! Nothing can repair it; for my faith

in man is gone. I trusted you far more than I would have trusted myself."

"You misunderstood my words. It is no promise of marriage that binds me. The duty of which I spoke" —

"We will not quibble about words;" and there was a sorrowful, passionate scorn in her voice. "I am afraid I understand your position too well: facts speak for themselves. Whatever you consider your obligations to that other person to be, they stand between us: that is clear. You knew I was not a common garrison flirt; you knew I was a girl who would give my whole heart, or nothing, to the man who sought me: and yet you thought you could amuse yourself with me for a few weeks, and no harm be done to either of us! My eyes are opened at last."

"God knows you wrong me! You labor altogether under a delusion; and I can only swear to you, as there is a Heaven above us, that I shall never marry any woman, since I cannot marry you." Then, suddenly struck by a horrible suspicion, he added rapidly, "Surely it is not possible that you — suspect" —

As he paused for an instant, a servant approached, and said, —

"Mrs. Fitzroy wishes particularly to speak to you for a moment, sir, in the house."

Christian's eye met Kate's. Her lip trembled; and she slowly turned away.

"Say I will be with Mrs. Fitzroy immediately," he said to the servant; and, as the latter retired, Christian followed Kate quickly, and began with impassioned entreaty,—

"For God's sake, Miss Vavasour"—

But the Philistines were upon them,—Mrs. Loveden and the captain on one side, Mrs. Crowe and the admiral on the other.

"I shall return to wish you good-by. I cannot leave you forever under this misapprehension," he murmured, as he turned quickly, and walked towards the house.

Mrs. Fitzroy was standing in the centre of her bedroom, white and tearless. She had just swallowed a strong dose of *sal-volatile*, and was nerved to go through the ordeal before her, though she should break down as soon as she was out of sight. Her dressing-bag was ready packed on the table before her: her foreign maid was busy over a huge trunk in the corner of the room. The windows, which were open, looked on the approach, where, every minute now, some carriage, dog-cart, or hired fly, drove up, and deposited its burthens at the porch. Then, slowly, the heated horses returned with their lightened loads the way

they came, and took up their stations along the shady lane outside the gate.

There was a knock at the door, and Christian entered. A letter she had just written was in Mrs. Fitzroy's hand.

"Christian, I know all, and I am going," she said in a low, firm voice. "Will you take me to the station?"

He looked steadily at her for a moment.

"I am young, and have life before me, mother. You have known Mr. Vavasour six and twenty years: I have known his daughter but a few weeks. It is fitting that I should renounce my short-lived claim here in your favor. Miss Vavasour knows my decision."

"It must not be. Remain here, Christian, and be happy. Your noble self-sacrifice deserves it. Only, henceforward, let me be something in your life. It cannot be much, I know. The fearful past is a gulf between us that may not be bridged over; but let me see you sometimes."

He could not speak for some minutes. The afternoon sun fell on his bronzed face and clear blue eyes; and the light in them grew tremulous before he replied, "I have learned to know you better, mother, in these two hours, than I ever did before; and I shall love you better in the time to come. I

shall never forget that you held peace, comfort, happiness, in your hand, and that you renounced them for me."

They pressed hands silently. There was no embrace, no outward demonstration; but those two hearts knew that they were drawn closer to each other than they had been since the days when he had been taken, as a little boy, from his mother's arms, and sent to a distant school.

The French maid, packing the trunk in the far corner of the room, acted as a wholesome restraint upon feelings, which, had they once given way, might have incapacitated Mrs. Fitzroy from immediate action. She now called to her maid, and gave her the letter she held, desiring in French that it should be delivered to Mr. Vavasour as soon as Mrs. Fitzroy should have left the house.

"I am going away immediately," she added. "You will follow me by the mail-train to-night, and join me at Doncaster." And the maid, who possessed the valuable property of never seeming to be surprised at any thing, took the letter, and promised that all madame's orders should be punctually obeyed.

Then the mother took her son's arm, and passed quickly down stairs, through the group of servants in the porch, and stepped into a fly which had just dis-

charged its freight, and was returning empty to the station.

Through a gap in the shrubs, Alcibiades perceived them, and immediately ran open-mouthed to his mamma. Mrs. Loveden's sentimental imagination at once conceived that it must be an elopement. What else could it be? That sweet, interesting, if misguided Mrs. Fitzroy, and the young man whom Miss Tarragon had beheld embracing her not an hour ago! Why, it stood to reason.

Kate, keeping her anger at white-heat, to avoid an outburst of anguish, happened to be standing near her father when Mrs. Loveden swam up to the group, of which he was the centre, and, with clasped hands, ejaculated, —

"O Mr. Vavasour! I am all of a twitter. Alcibiades has just seen them go off together!"

"Go off? Who? What do you mean?" And the "Who?" was re-echoed by the chorus around.

"Why, Mrs. Fitzroy, — that sweet woman (I always felt there was a romance about her), and the young man — in a fly. And Alcibiades heard him desire the coachman to drive as fast as he could to the station, to catch the train: so there's no doubt about it, you know."

"Alcibiades might be better employed than in being dressed up in

uniform, and disseminating scandal, Mrs. Loveden. Mrs. Fitzroy is in her room."

"I hope *not*, Mr. Vavasour," almost shrieked Miss Tarragon. "I hope *not*. You must permit me to say, that, if the lady who has been your guest for the last fortnight is gone, so much the better for *all*. Information has reached us as to her antecedents, which really would render it quite impossible for us to visit her."

"I am not aware that you were ever asked to do so," returned Vavasour sternly. "If you knew all that Mrs. Fitzroy has suffered, — if you knew her story as I do, — I cannot believe that the woman exists who would pursue her with relentless cruelty."

"Millwood society has always been above reproach," returned the spinster in a somewhat lower key. "I hope I have no wish to be cruel, or relentless (it is a very harsh expression); but we must look to our characters, Mr. Vavasour."

"Look to your character for charity, ma'am! The other part of your character will take care of itself," he returned fiercely. "And remember this. It is all of *you* who sought Mrs. Fitzroy: *she* who avoided you. Depend on it, she will continue to do so."

Davis approached at this moment, with a letter on a salver, which he handed to Vavasour.

"Mrs. Fitzroy has been called away suddenly, sir, and desired that this should be given to you."

He started as if he had been shot. Poor Kate, brave even in her agony, crept up, and, drawing his arm within hers, led him away, while with trembling hands he tore the letter open.

"Then she *is* gone!" cried Miss Tarragon triumphantly, as soon as the master of the house was out of hearing. "And he meant to marry her, I'm certain, if we hadn't frightened her away. But no one shall ever say I shrank from doing my duty; and, as long as my name is Jane Tarragon, vice shall never go unpunished in Millwood."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE letter told him all. It pointed out how impossible it was, considering the relations in which the writer stood towards her son, that she should marry the father of the girl he hoped to be his wife. "He pities me; he provides for me: but he shrinks from me. Love has as yet no part in my son's feeling for me, my friend; and it is my just punishment that it should be so. If I married you, it would part me and my son forever. If I sacrifice myself for him, his heart may, in time, give me some little portion of what I have craved so long. Ah! my old

friend, will you forgive me for having troubled your life, the course of which was so serene? The time is past for us: the time is come for them whom we both love so dearly. For their sakes, we must forget what might have been."

He read it in a distant part of the shrubbery. The girl led him to a bench, and sat holding one of his hands, her head upon his shoulder. Her tears flowed freely.

"Oh! I can cry now, papa. I am so happy!"

"Ah, my darling!" he replied in a broken voice; "but the gain to you is loss to me. Her son! How wonderful! Yes, it is natural you should rejoice; but don't forget her. My poor Amabel! Make your husband cherish his mother, my child. She'll be doubly lonely now. God help her!"

In a garden on the outskirts of one of the northern cathedral towns stands a modest house, which has been inhabited for the last year by a lady whose active but unobtrusive charity has made her generally respected. No one knows her history; and the dwell-

ers in the great city, having more interests than the inhabitants of a small village, trouble themselves but little about an unobtrusive, middle-aged woman, who offers but little food for curiosity and speculation. From time to time, a young man of military bearing visits her, arriving by the train, and remaining some hours. He generally comes alone; but more than once he has been accompanied by a young lady, whom the neighbors have decided is his wife. The only other visitor from a distance is a small, middle-aged man, with keen black eyes. It has been observed that he always looks sad when he departs by the evening train. If the lady be so, no one knows; but her life is too fully occupied to leave much time for unhealthy and unavailing retrospect. The "peace" which she sought in the homage, luxury, and dreamful inaction of an existence unstirred by any breath from the harsh world, she has found in the loving gratitude of the many fallen whom her hand has lifted, and set forward on their way unto a better life.



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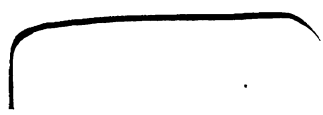
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